

2

Lunatic
Sister

Wild Times with a

Fake Fake

Princess

Story by Ichiro Sakaki
Art by Kaori Fujita

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Chapter 1 - The Hesitation of White Day

There were students dotted around in the courtyard, covered in the school building's long shadow and the color of the setting sun. It was spring in name only, with the chill still in the air.

The familiar scenery spread out beneath his gaze. As he watched the sight, leaning on the fence atop the roof, Kyouhei let out a sigh of absolute bliss.

Ah, peace certainly is the best.

A quiet moment, with nothing at all out of the ordinary, was just what he longed for.

He didn't enjoy standing out or drawing attention; he just wanted to live an ordinary life in an ordinary way.

The commonplace was perfect, the normality welcome, and the peace just brilliant. God was in his heaven, and all was right with the world.

Professor Clark would have probably despaired at his aspirations saying something like: "No, boy, be a bit ambitious!" But he wasn't causing anyone hassle, so no one really had reason to complain.

And so, Kyouhei luxuriated in watching the everyday, peaceful school scene, and in being a part of it, like an old man basking in the sun.

However...

"Onii-chan."

Luxuriation never could last for too long. Kyouhei was sure it was inherent spite on the part of God.

"What are you doing?" came the clear voice again. "Let's go home."

Kyouhei let out another sigh, this one of reluctance, as he turned around.

There was a girl standing in the fading sunlight. She had wide, sapphire eyes that were currently looking at Kyouhei in puzzlement.

She was beautiful, and with those sweet looks, her standing silently in place made her look like a picture of elegance. Her pale skin almost seemed like it had been formed from porcelain by a master of the craft. Her flowing golden hair contrasted magnificently against her russet blazer. The girl was like a piece of art, standing in the dimming light.

She was a beauty usually only seen on the other side of the CRT or on canvases.

This was Harumi Nanbu.

She had a Japanese name, but her characteristic blue eyes and blonde hair made it clear that she was Caucasian.

Even Kyouhei rarely called her by the name on the family register. Well, the registration itself was something his father had arranged through some shady method anyway.

“Pamil...”

Informally, that was the name she usually went by. It was also the name of the goddess of destruction that had completely and utterly ruined his normalcy.

“At least let me soak in the peace sometimes,” he implored her.

“Hmm?” She tilted her head in question. Even that simple action was adorable, like a tiny bird doing much the same.

Now...

If only she didn’t call herself a body double android of a princess, or fire beams from her eyes and lightning from her hands...

Kyouhei truly wished for that to be the case. Unfortunately for him, her claims continued even now, and he didn’t know whether to call them silly or crazy.

If they were just thoughtless words, then there wouldn’t be—actually, there probably would be a problem, but it’d be much better than the current state of things.

Pamil, though, looked exactly like a human. She bathed, used the toilet, ate, and slept soundly in her bed. And yet, she could fire beams from her eyes that would pulverize concrete, so Kyouhei couldn’t let his guard down.

Who was this girl, though? Even to Kyouhei, officially her brother, it was an absolute mystery.

“Watching the courtyard from the roof is peace for you?”

“...Well, you can look at it that way,” he answered, not wanting the hassle of explaining it to the very antithesis of peace.

Then, a high pitched, upbeat song blasted from Kyouhei’s phone in his pocket.

“Mama and Papa were laying in bed,

Mama rolled over and this is what she said:

Oh, give me some! Oh, give me some!

P.T.! P.T.!

Good for you,

Good for me,

Mmmh, good.”

The screen showed the name ‘Mizuhito Hibiki.’ Kyouhei didn’t remember setting that ringtone, but that figured. It was hardly unlikely for Mizuhito to have just taken his phone and set it himself.

Reluctantly, he pushed the answer button.

“Oh, my dear friend!” came the greeting from the phone.

“Close friend? What, are you trying to be Big G?”

“Let’s start the recital, lyah lyah!”

“Let’s not. Weren’t you supposed to be at work?” Kyouhei asked.

This... was also one of the reasons Kyouhei was taking his fill of the peaceful normalcy on the roof. Pamil was indeed on another level with her strangeness and beam attacks, but... Unlike her, Mizuhito was always in the same classroom as him, trampling over that calm. He had work today, though, so he had left school without Kyouhei.

“Yup, I’m there right now.”

“Shut up and work then, wage slave.”

“Don’t be so uptight. Anyway, you got chocolate on Valentine’s, right?”

“Huh?”

Kyouhei’s brow furrowed at the abrupt change of subject. Valentine’s Day was a month ago now.

He had indeed received chocolate from some of the girls, Pamil and Sanae included. Well, strictly speaking, Pamil’s gift hadn’t been chocolate, but that was irrelevant.

“Oh, right,” he remembered. A month had passed since Valentine’s Day. In other words, “White Day, huh?”

“That’s the ticket. My place is doing a special for it. Figured I’d save you some good stuff for cheap. Ah, battery’s nearly dead; quick, quick, answer please!”

“...You’re the one that phoned me out of nowhere... Oh yeah, and don’t change people’s ringtones.”

“Huh, you don’t like *Pixel☆Maritan*?”

“There’s a time and place!”

Obviously, most people would ostracize you for using a magical girl anime’s theme tune as your ringtone. Plus, the lyrics of the song in question raised some other problems... Anyway.

“How ’bout it then, want me to?”

“Yeah... Just six, please,” Kyouhei answered.

One of them might not have been chocolate, and definitely tasted odd... Obligation or not, though, he should return the favor.

“Alright, the breakdown?” Mizuhito asked.

“Breakdown?”

“You can’t just get six of the same thing.”

Doubt made its way onto Kyouhei’s face. “I can’t?”

“Come on, Kyouhei. You know that paying it back on White Day is the same as answering if you’d date them, family aside, don’t you? It’s not just paying obligation back with obligation.”

“Eh? Wai—Wha—?!” Kyouhei sputtered. The thought hadn’t even crossed his mind.

Immediately afterward, his phone made a lifeless beep, and he just stared at it... Then, Kyouhei gave a short sigh. Mizuhito’s phone had probably gone flat.

That was to be expected, but...

“...What am I supposed to say to that...?” he muttered.

Pamil, Sanae Murata, Youko Minebe, Kaoruko Houwa, and two girls he got on relatively well with in his year. Those were the people Kyouhei had received chocolate—and non-chocolate—presents from.

His classmates, Youko, and Kaoruko had clearly given them with no real meaning behind them. However dense and removed he was with romance, Kyouhei could still tell that. Particularly with Youko; she’d just given it to him at the same time as Sanae had.

However...

“Hmm...”

It was hard for him to tell the intention behind Sanae’s present.

She’d given him chocolate brownies in an extravagant box... and there wasn’t a distinct boundary between chocolate given out of obligation and that given with feelings. She seemed like an earnest girl, so even out of obligation, she might still make something by hand, instead of using a hundred-yen chocolate you could get at any store.

Still, they barely knew each other... and Kyouhei wasn’t conceited enough to assume that a girl like that would give him chocolates from the heart.

“Dating, huh...?”

Kyouhei had never actually had a girlfriend. His current greatest wish was “to live a normal life,” so he’d put that kind of thing off... or rather, just not really thought about it.

Though, that said, he was a healthy teen. If he had to come down one way or the other on wanting a girlfriend, he did want one.

But...

“What’s wrong, Kyouhei?” Pamil asked him, peering at his face as he stood lost in thought.

“...Ah, it’s nothing,” he mumbled noncommittally.

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“No major changes.”

The figure murmuring was atop a building, watching Kyouhei and Pamil with a pair of binoculars.

They were wearing a black suit, black tie, black hat, and black sunglasses. The *Men in Black* look; they wouldn’t have been out of place silencing UFO witnesses or taking in aliens to somewhere around Groom Lake.

Indeed not...

“Things sure are peaceful,” commented a young redheaded woman. She too was in the exact same clothing as the other woman next to her, so really, they should have been called the Women in Black.

“...Sis,” said the shorter-haired woman, also a redhead.

“Emmitt, I’ve told you before not to call me that when we’re working,” the longer-haired woman said, still peering through the binoculars.

“...Elsia, how long do we have to do this?”

“No real choice, is there? That was the condition we had to make up for failing last time.”

The woman called Emmitt let out a long sigh. “I really don’t trust that Colonel.”

“The pay’s good, though; we even get discretionary expenses.”

“That’s true.”

“Surveillance duty isn’t all that dangerous either, plus Japanese food is tasty,

so it isn't bad."

"Can't deny it," Emmitt admitted.

"What are you upset about then?" asked the woman called Elsia, unhappily.

"...For being asked to keep watch on a girl that can shoot beams from her eyes, we don't know a thing about her. Doesn't that feel like we've got the short straw?"

Elsia's silence at the question made it clear that she had her own doubts niggling away on the corner of her mind.

"Well," she finally said, removing the binoculars from her face and turning to look at her younger sister, "would you rather go back to Potsdam and take over the family business? You like polishing lamps?" This time it was Emmitt who fell silent. "If it gets too bad, we'll just run," Elsia assured her sister.

"I hope it's not too late by the time we realize it," Emmitt answered with a gloomy expression.

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A girlfriend... thought Kyouhei as he gazed vacantly up at the excessively high ceiling. Well, that was to be expected with it being a warehouse. *You know... I've never really thought about it...*

Kyouhei had never experienced the company of a woman in that way. Of course, it wasn't that he didn't have desires of that ilk, but he'd be lost if you asked him what kind of woman he liked.

He was a healthy guy in his teens, though, so looking through the erotica forced upon him by Mizuhito was arousing, but... Honestly, that was mostly the case for any naked woman. What he felt were just instincts.

The thing is, he hadn't thought particularly deeply about what he'd want in a woman.

Like, for instance, whether he'd like an energetic girl, a quiet girl... Whether he'd prefer a slender or chubbier girl... Older or younger...

"Ummmm..."

...I guess Kaoruko-san is about the only girl I've been interested in...

The Corvette's owner, Kaoruko Houwa, appeared in his mind's eye.

Her gentle, calm impression and voice felt peaceful, healing, and put him at ease. She had her oddities, especially with her hobbies and actions, but... compared to the cavalcade of weirdos around him, she was relatively normal.

She'd been a lot of help to him and Shuuhei when they returned to Japan, and he had felt stirrings of affection for her.

Other than her...

...Ah, oh yeah...

He remembered a girl he had met in some part of Europe. It had been long, long ago, when he was still being hauled around the world by Shuuhei.

He couldn't remember the specific circumstances at all, but the girl wore a soft and poofy dress, with lots of frills, and she'd looked like a doll.

That was a shock, he thought to himself. Until then, Kyouhei had been over all sorts of war-torn countries, where even girls his age would carry handguns for self-defense, or have children at 13... That's why that girl's ethereality and almost otherworldliness had left a deep impression on him.

Even as a child, he'd been astounded to see such a pretty and delicate girl in the same world as all of that.

Honestly, the specifics of her features and what they'd talked about had been clouded by later memories. Regardless, the air she had around her had remained in his mind until now.

She was like a princess out of a fairy tale... Actually, didn't she have blonde hair and blue—

"What's wrong, Kyouhei? Have you finished with dinner?"

The question made Kyouhei surface from the depths of his thoughts.

He turned around to see Pamil waiting at the table for her food.

Kyouhei had been preparing the meal in the kitchen. Said kitchen, or rather collection of cookware and appliances, was in a corner of the warehouse.

“...Almost,” he answered. He’d probably not even spent a minute spacing out. The meat in the pan was cooked and about to start burning, so he hurriedly plated it. The glacé carrots were also just finishing up, so he turned off the heat and plated them as well. Finally, he added the chopped cabbage.

He moved the entire pot of corn soup and rice to the table—the Nanbu household had a tradition of doing that and letting people just serve themselves however much they wanted. Dinner was now ready.

Pamil nodded in satisfaction at the food in front of her.

“Good work. Now, let us feast!”

She was being rather grandiose for no real reason. Well, being the (self-proclaimed) body double android of some princess, maybe that made sense.

...And yet she eats and sleeps like everyone else.

Pamil was nimbly cutting up her meat and ferrying it to her mouth with her knife and fork.

She was oddly intent on her chewing, almost like a squirrel or hamster eating away. It was actually strangely cute. Whether by nature or nurture, she usually wasn’t particularly expressive, but she always seemed so happy at times like this; even Kyouhei was happy to cook for her.

...She’s blonde and has blue eyes too...

Just like the girl in his memories.

The impression she gave was completely different, so he hadn’t thought to compare them. Well, he hadn’t even thought back to that girl before the discussion about women came up.

She might have been his first love.

Hmmm...?

“What’s wrong, Kyouhei? Aren’t you hungry?” Pamil asked. The sudden question once again brought him back to the present. She was blinking her sapphire eyes at him, having found it odd that he hadn’t touched his food. “If you’re not, I’ll have your carrots.”

“...You’re pretty greedy for a princess’ body double android.”

“Hm? Is that strange?”

“Well... whatever,” Kyouhei muttered vaguely, putting his carrots onto Pamil’s plate.

...Women... and love, huh?

The words wouldn’t settle in his mind; like they were foreign words he’d just heard, they drifted through his thoughts.

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“So then,” said Youko Minebe, an expectant smile on her face, “it’s almost here.”

The girl was energetic, and the ponytail on her head suited her well.

The clock hanging on the wall showed ten minutes past one in the afternoon: lunchtime.

Pamil, Sanae, and her friend Youko were seated around a makeshift dining table. They’d put together two desks and sat around them with their lunches.

“Hm? What’s almost here?” Pamil asked. Her lunch, incidentally, had been made by Kyouhei, using the leftovers from dinner the night before. However, she was currently chewing on a strawberry jam bun from the school shop, the same as Sanae.

“White Day!” exclaimed Youko.

“White day? What is a day that’s white?” Pamil parroted. The words had gotten through, regardless of Youko pronouncing them with a Japanese accent.

“Ah, right,” Youko realized with a self-deprecating smile, “you wouldn’t know about Japanese customs like that.”

“Hm, it’s a Japanese custom despite being in English?” she asked.

Youko shrugged and nodded. “It’s said like that because it matches with Valentine’s Day.”

Incidentally, White Day was fundamentally a Japanese custom. The day existed in South Korea and Taiwan because of influence from Japan, but unlike

Valentine's Day, White Day didn't exist in the West.

It made sense that Pamil didn't know about it, but then again, she hadn't known about Valentine's Day either.

"It's a day where boys that got chocolate on Valentine's Day give marshmallows or candy back to the girls..." she said before cutting herself off, "right?"

Youko had turned to look meaningfully at Sanae.

"Y-Youko-chan?"

"I wonder what Nanbu-senpai will do. I'm looking forward to it. Aren't you, Sanae?"

Sanae's face went bright red as her mouth closed and opened like a fish out of water.

Her name was Sanae Murata. She had a bob-cut the likes of which you rarely saw those days, and her distinguishing feature was probably her round glasses. She was almost the poster girl for a 'plain girl.'

On closer inspection, though, she certainly wasn't unattractive. She definitely lacked an energetic atmosphere about her, but instead had the looks of a Japanese beauty, or a prim and proper air.

"Hmm? Would Kyouhei—I mean, Onii-chan, do something for that white day?"

"Well, he'll pay us back," said Youko. "I guess Nanbu-senpai might just forget the whole holiday, but he's pretty dutiful, so he'll probably do it properly, right?"

"M-Maybe..." Sanae said with her eyes downcast.

Her face had gone even redder... if you had put a kettle on her head, it'd probably boil instantly.

"Well, mine was obviously out of obligation... but yours was handmade, so it probably made an impact. I wonder if he'll realize it was given from the heart?"

"...M... M-M... Maybe..."

“What’ll it be? Marshmallows? Cookies? Or maybe...”

“...Maybe...?”

“Maybe it’ll be a ring?”

Sanae pitched over at the suggestion, far beyond all allowances (of what?), but Youko noticed and grabbed her by the collar, pulling her back up.

Pamil watched them curiously for a while, and then...

“So, will Onii-chan do that for me too?” she asked. “I gave him a Valentine.”

“It’s a bit different for family members,” Youko explained with another reluctant smile, “but for Sanae—”

“T-That’s enough... yeah? We can talk about something else... I-like next class...” the girl in question cut her off and tried to wave the subject off, flapping her hands around.

“Hmm? I don’t see how,” Pamil continued regardless. “Can family not show gratitude?”

“Ah, so that’s how you see Valentine’s,” Youko said with a nod after a moment of confusion. “Well, there are girls who give chocolate to their fathers, subordinates to their superiors at work too, so there’s a strong element of that. However, in Japan, it’s mostly about giving chocolate to the guy you like.”

“The guy... you like?” Pamil tilted her head.

“The one you want as a boyfriend,” Youko answered.

Obviously, she’d said so cheerfully, but...

“Hmmmm?”

Something about that had bothered Pamil... she folded her arms and her face took a serious expression as she began to think.

Youko and Sanae exchanged a glance. They’d never thought she’d take it like this.

“Well, it’s different with family,” Youko frantically explained. “You’re his little sister, so you don’t need to worry about that.”

But then...

“So you’re telling me that Valentine’s Day has nothing to do with sisters? Well, I like Kyouhei—Onii-chan too, he deserves it,” she declared bluntly and shamelessly.

“W-Well, it’s not completely unrelated,” Youko managed, somewhat overwhelmed, “but I think your chocolate would have had a different meaning to Sanae’s.”

“Hmm?” The mystery seemed to deepen for her as she furrowed her eyebrows, not understanding the implications. “...Being his sister, it doesn’t concern me, but it does for Sanae?”

“R-Right, exactly,” Youko insisted, “so you mustn’t stop things going well between them.”

“Wait... Youko-chan?!” protested the girl in question.

“Hmm, get in the way? How would—” Pamil started, once again confused.

It was obvious that she had no knowledge of this kind of thing. Plus, she was just bad at reading between the lines.

Youko let out a sigh and then explained.

“I mean, if they start going out, don’t do anything thoughtless; you’re his sister after all.”

“Y-Youko-chan... can we stop already...? Otherwise, I’ll...”

Sanae was clutching a strawman she’d pulled from somewhere, and looked just about ready to start pounding a stake into it.

“Don’t you curse me!” Youko shouted, before addressing Pamil again: “Anyway, that’s how it is.”

Youko had figured that things would just get worse if she continued, so tried to just finish it off there.

“Hmmm...”

Nevertheless, Pamil was still grumbling.



Generally, Kyouhei and Pamil would leave school together. Kyouhei didn't have any club activities, and neither did Pamil, so they usually agreed upon a place and time, waited for the later one of the pair, and went home together.

Mizuhito and some others would tease them for being such close siblings. From Kyouhei's perspective, though, it wasn't for the reason they were hoping. It was simply because he had no idea what the crazy girl would do next if he let her out of his sight.

Her picking up an apple from the greengrocer's and just starting to eat it was still on the cute side of things—it wasn't enough to call theft, and apologizing on the spot and paying for it would usually smooth things over. However, Pamil could end up firing lasers and lightning strikes, causing property damage or even death.

Once law enforcement got involved and checked her documents, all kinds of issues could come to light. Kyouhei, who longed for a peaceful, normal life, wanted to avoid that at all costs. Therefore, to prevent any needless issues, they walked home together as Kyouhei kept watch...

“...Pamil?”

But that day, he suddenly noticed that his 'sister' was nowhere to be seen, despite being next to him only moments ago.

“Not again...”

Kyouhei frantically looked around.

He was on a street full of shops, lit with the orange glow of the sunset. Students and shoppers were going to and fro. Finally, he found Pamil standing alone in the crowd.

“Pa... mil...?” he called, trailing off.

Something about her was different. There was a distinct shadow over her face as she stood there in thought. Pamil's gaze was downcast, and she was looking at something in the display window.

The fiery glow of the sunset, along with her golden hair swaying in the wind, gave her an utterly ephemeral impress—

...Ah.

The image matched that of another girl, in the distant reaches of his memory.

The sight of her just standing on the street was almost like gazing upon a painting, or a sepia-tone photo.

She was a self-proclaimed body double for a princess.

And so...

She looks like a real princess when she's quiet...

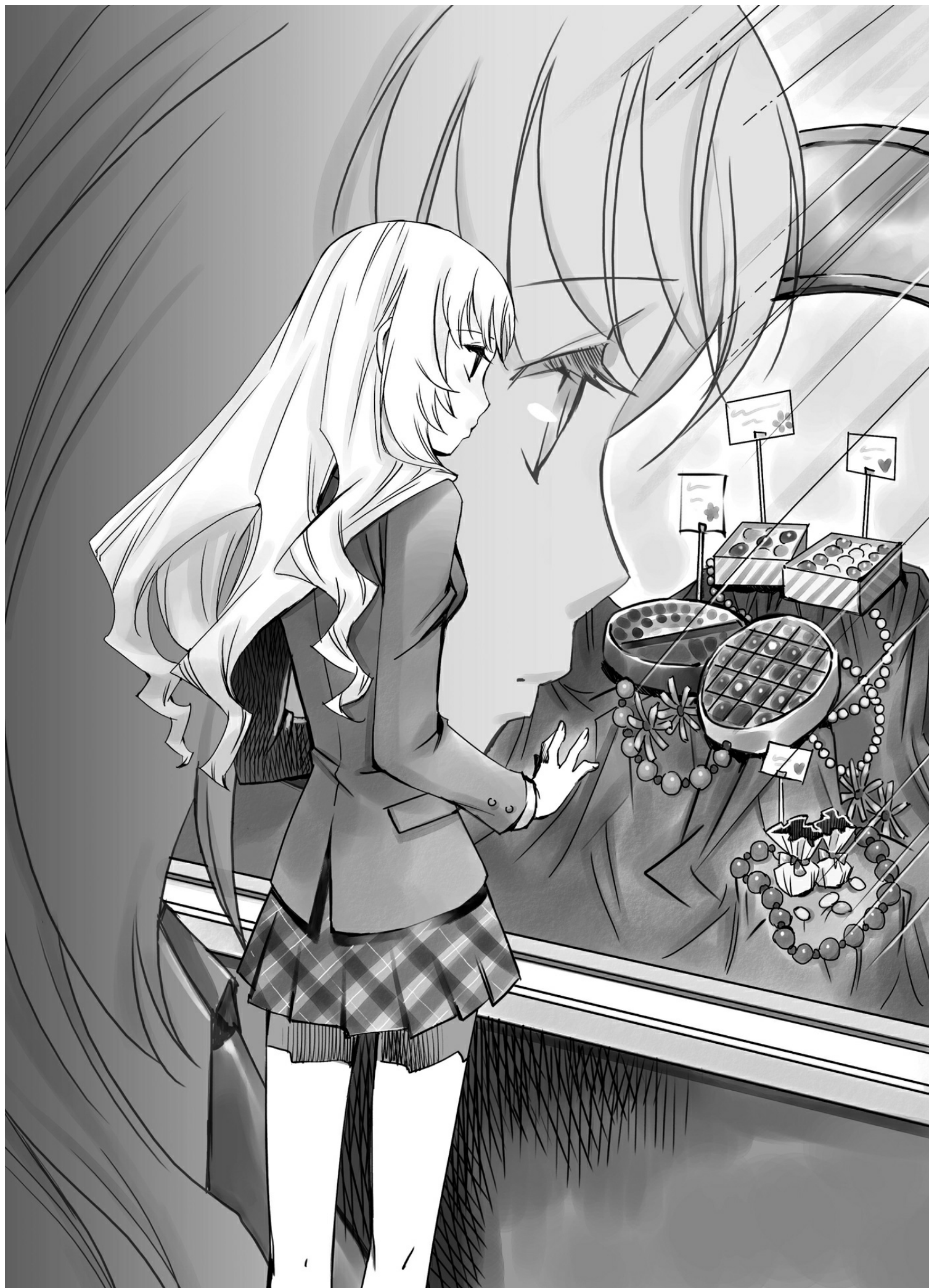
Her profile certainly did have an elegant beauty to it.

Kyouhei couldn't quite call her name, and just stood there watching her for a while, when...

"...Huh?"

He noticed what she was looking at and stiffened.

The display was a Western candy shop's, and was adorned with a big message board past the pane of glass.



On said board were messages like:

“White Day Fare

Wrap up your ‘I love you’

And gift it

To your precious girlfriend.”

Just looking at them in their rounded writing made his spine itch.

Even a cliché like that did have its appeal for this kind of occasion, though.

...Well, I did get one from Pamil too.

A Valentine’s gift. It might not have been chocolate... but well, it was the thought that mattered, not how expensive or tasty it was.

Although...

It might have been due to her similarity with the girl in his memories, but... the word ‘woman’ floated up in his mind.

“Hm?”

After about three minutes, Pamil finally noticed his gaze and turned to face him.

“Hm, my apologies. I was just thinking... and I stopped walking.”

“Ah... Well, I don’t... really mind,” he told her, scratching at his cheek. For some reason, he felt odd as her blue eyes watched him, so he turned his gaze away. “...Do you... uh... you know, want to get something sweet... to eat?”

The words had no sooner left his mouth than he regretted them. Asking something like that, especially here and now, was somewhat obvious, and sounded more meaningful than it should.

“Nh...?” Just as he’d feared, a dubious expression crossed her face. “Hmm... a small amount of dextrose or glucose has all the energy an organism needs, so they need to have an intake, but...”

She’d started off the same way as she always would, but trailed off towards the end, and her blue eyes moved towards the cards beyond the storefront.

A slightly unconformable silence filled the air.

They were in the middle of a crowded street, but it felt like the world

consisted only of the two of them; it was strangely hard to breathe.

“Ah... well... you know,” Kyouhei started aimlessly after a short period of the silence, “shall we... go home?”

“Y-Yeah... let’s.”

Both of them were speaking awkwardly, and the awkwardness followed them along as they set off home again.

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Meanwhile.

Someone was watching them from the shadows. And from behind her glasses, to be more specific.

It was Sanae.

Her house wasn’t in that direction, and so even if she had left the school with them, she would have broken off on the way.

But due to her affection—nearly lovesick stalker tendencies—towards Kyouhei, she hadn’t gone home. Every couple of days, she would follow them all the way to the warehouse like this.

Let’s put that aside.

“...Senpai...” she almost moaned as she slumped into the telephone pole she was behind.

She’d had an ominous feeling since lunch that day. She wasn’t sure how much Pamil had understood about the meaning behind the chocolate she had given to Kyouhei. Regardless, she had acted strangely when she found out the true meaning behind Valentine’s Day. Usually, that would just be another thing to add to the list of her strangeness, but the reaction had bothered Sanae.

Could she... she thought to herself as she continued her observation, or rather, surveillance of the two.

Seen from afar, it just looked like they were having a casual conversation between slightly weird siblings. However, a maiden’s ultra-sensitive sensors surpassed even military satellites, and they could see a slightly unusual mood

between the two.

“Well... I might have my doubts... but, but, they’re siblings... I thought... there was nothing there... but... but Senpai is a wonderful person, so I can understand... why Pamil-chan would fall for him...!”

Kyouhei was handsome, kind, wonderful, and without fault (in Sanae’s estimation).

Even if they are siblings, Pamil-chan won’t be able to resist his charms...!

Sanae’s hand had found its way around her strawman as she shook.

She had been naive.

They’d suddenly grown much closer since Valentine’s Day (from Sanae’s perspective), and were just now on the verge of opening the gate into the forbidden realms with each other...! (According to her judgment.) She was just about to pound the stake into her strawman with “Forbid Onii-chan love” on it, but she suddenly came to her senses and stopped.

She couldn’t do it.

Pamil... was one of her few friends. She might start laying a curse inadvertently, but she couldn’t make a conscious decision to do so.

Still though...

“...Senpai.”

On that front, Kyouhei didn’t seem to be making any real preparations for White Day. He also hadn’t bought anything suitable in the past few days either. Surely, even he wouldn’t handmade snacks for White Day.

Which meant...

“...Yeah... it’s no use...” she muttered with watery eyes.

At the same time, some pretty outrageous fantasies started playing themselves out in the back of her mind.

“Pamil,” called a soft voice.

She turned around to see her smiling brother. He stretched out his arms to

her, his usual soft expression on his face.

“Ah...”

There was no time for surprise, Pamil’s petite body was wrapped in Kyouhei’s arms.

“What do you want... for White Day?” her brother asked.

“I... I...” she stuttered, looking down.

“You?”

“...I... I’ll be happy... with whatever... you give me...” Pamil managed, pressing her cheek into his chest. Indeed, she would be happy no matter what Kyouhei gave her. Cookies or marshmallows; expensive or cheap. It didn’t even need to be food.

It didn’t even need to be a thing...

“Whatever, huh? That’ll be tough.”

“...W-Will it?”

“Just go ahead and say it. What do you want the most? I’ll get you whatever you want.”

“...Really?” she asked.

“Really.”

“Then...” she murmured, breathing in her brother’s scent, “I... want... you...”

“Pamil, you...?”

Kyouhei’s hand slid up to cup her cheek. She had moved slightly away from him, following the urging of his hand, moving her face up, and then... softly closing her eyes.

Their shadows overlapped each other.

Then, with a rustle, discarded clothes joined the pile and—

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!” screamed Sanae, in despair from her own fantasies.

Right, now it made sense why Kyouhei hadn’t prepared a White Day

present...! (In Sanae's mind.) "That... That's... That's awful...!"

She was dizzy from the assault of her own delusions, and spun down to sit on the ground.

"Mama, that girl's strange," came a voice from her side.

"Shh, you mustn't point," scolded the child's mother as they passed.

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Kyouhei suddenly decided to pull a photo album from the bookcase. It was the one that had taken the brunt of Pamil's beam before.

"Yeah... nothing here," he muttered to himself.

Even as he flipped back through his memories... there wasn't a single photo of the girl that was stuck in his mind. Most of the photos that Pamil had destroyed were redeveloped from the negatives, but... It might have been a photo they only had the positive for, or maybe there was never one taken in the first place.

"I guess I'll ask Dad when he gets back."

They hadn't been around Europe much, relatively speaking, so Shuuhei might remember.

Searching through his vague memories... he could remember there was a big building behind the girl; maybe a castle?

Where on Earth was it?

"...This is ridiculous," he muttered self-derisively.

So what if he figured out where he knew the girl from? She'd just left an impression on him, that didn't mean she was his first love.

"Romance, huh...?" he muttered as he laid down on his bed.

The scene in his mind was that of Pamil on the way home, when she was focused on the White Day display...

I'm not looking at her like that... Well, I did, but...

At the end of the day, he'd first seen her when she was stark naked. Even if he'd not wanted to, he was well aware that Pamil was a girl. Lust into romance

didn't feel right, though.

"Hmmm..."

Anyway, it was an objective fact that Pamil had been acting strangely all day.

Kyouhei had more or less come to accept that their bizarre life living together would carry on as it was. However, that was as long as their relationship, and the way they saw each other, remained the same—should that change, it would definitely have an effect on their current situation.

If Pamil was to start seeing Kyouhei as a man...

"It's a tough one," muttered Kyouhei to himself as he tossed and turned on his bed.

● ● ●

It was morning, and there was not a cloud in the sky.

And yet, there was a strangely tense mood between Kyouhei and Pamil.

The two of them were walking, completely silent, side-by-side down the almost deserted street.

Kyouhei noticed that Pamil was a little further away from him than usual. He was probably overly conscious of her because of the agonizing over White Day.

However, that unconformable atmosphere was tiring him out the longer he was in it.

"...Good... morning... Nanbu-senpai..." came a voice.

"Whoa?!"

The scenery on the way to school on this fourteenth day of March was interrupted by Sanae, who was looking out from behind a bright red postbox in the fourth block. She looked run-ragged, almost like a ghost.

"M-Murata-san...?" Kyouhei asked, looking at her in surprise. She was... how to put it? She looked utterly shattered. Her hair was a mess, and she had black rings under her eyes. At the very least, she definitely hadn't slept last night. "W-What's wrong?"

"...I just... um... had a bad dream... or something..." she explained.

He let out a sigh. Would that really justify how exhausted she looked?

“Well... you’re here now, so let’s go to school together,” suggested Kyouhei.

For his part, her coming with them might well stop the oppressive atmosphere between Pamil and him.

“Ah... yeah...” She nodded listlessly.

Looking at her, Kyouhei suddenly remembered something and opened his bag.

“Oh yeah, here, Murata-san,” he said, offering something to her.

“...Ah...” She blinked, looking at the thing in his hand. It was a small box, neatly wrapped. “S-Senpai... is... is this?”

“Well, uh, it’s me returning the favor,” he said. “Mizuhito, that weird guy that’s always hanging around with me, works at a sweet shop. They do some pretty fancy sweets at this time of year, so I got him to get hold of some. They’ll taste good at least,” he explained, scratching his cheek.

He saw her start to shake, but then: “T-Thank you so much!” she yelled, gripping the box tightly.

“Uh, well, I’m glad you like... it,” Kyouhei managed with a faint smile, overwhelmed by how happy she was.

Naturally, he had no idea. Not of her self-reinforcing delusions, not of her certainty that “he obviously forgot about my chocolate,” and not of her torturing herself into depression.

Of course, he’d only given her some fairly inoffensive snacks. However, that was proof that he hadn’t forgotten about her, when Sanae was certain that she would get nothing, and that struck her to her core.

And then...

“...Right, I’ve got one for you too, Pamil,” Kyouhei said, holding out another box to her.

But Pamil shook her head. “...You can’t, Kyouhei.”

“Huh?”

“I cannot accept that,” she insisted.

“What are you on about?” Kyouhei frowned.

“White Day has nothing to do with siblings. If I accept that, I can’t be your sister, can I?”

“...Seriously, what are you on about?”

“I can be with you while I’m your sister,” Pamil mumbled towards the ground, “but...”

That’s when Kyouhei understood.

“Ah... that’s what it was.”

It was fear.

She was anxious over her standing as his ‘sister,’ for that was the only ‘home’ left for her in this world.

That was why she was scared that, if the bonds between them changed, she might lose even that.

She was a princess’ body double android, but then, the monarchy of her country had been destroyed.

She... had lost her entire reason to exist. That probably made her much more sensitive to all of this.

“It’s fine, here you go,” he insisted, pushing the box towards her chest with a slight smile.

“Hmm?”

“You can be my sister as long as you like. A few snacks or little things like that aren’t going to change that. You don’t need to think too hard about it.”

“...I... don’t?” she asked questioningly.



Kyouhei let out a small sigh.

Anyone and everyone, Kyouhei included, was overthinking all of this. Taking advantage of Valentine's Day or White Day was fine, but making such a big deal over it was putting the cart before the horse.

It was better to let things develop between people more naturally, at their own pace.

So...

"Let's go, the bell's about to ring," he said with a strained smile on his face.

"Ah, right." Sanae nodded immediately.

"Indeed," Pamil added with a deep nod.

Chapter 2 - I Want to See

The girl sat softly on the edge of the bed and looked at Kyouhei. Would a single touch shatter her? That's how delicate the girl looked. She wore a white dress, looking like a shining gem waiting for its dull wrapping to be torn away.

Kyouhei reached out and grabbed hold of her shoulder.

"...Pamil," he murmured, breath catching in his chest as he tried to hold back, "answer me properly... I want to hear you say it seriously."

"Hm..."

Her gold, silken hair swayed with her motions. In the dim light, it looked like the hair itself was glowing due to its glossiness.

Her clear blue eyes, so reminiscent of sapphires, looked directly at him. There was no hesitation nor indecision in them.

"...Pamil," he said again. Her determined expression had made him all the more nervous, and it showed in his voice. Slowly, ever so slowly, he continued his question, so that each and every word would penetrate right into her mind: "...in the tenth century, what was the name of the anthology containing 1100 songs?"

"The Anthologia Graeca," Pamil answered immediately, completely certain.

However...

"Incorrect," Kyouhei coldly informed her.

"T-That's wrong?!" Pamil asked him, eyes wide in shock.

"It is."

"Hmm, but I'm sure that the Anthologia Graeca was compiled in—"

"Pamil," Kyouhei interrupted with a sigh and a reluctant smile.

And then...

"We're doing Japanese history!!" he cried, pointing at the textbook for the

very same subject on the table.



Six hours prior to that, Kyouhei had sated his hunger with a sandwich from the school shop. It was the fifth period of the day, and sleepiness was currently assailing him.

Kyouhei should have been paying attention to his ever-beloved peaceful, normal, average lesson... And it was an average lesson, until the teacher opened their mouth.

“This will all be on your finals, make sure you review it,” came the warning as the teacher knocked on the blackboard with a chalk. Simultaneously, the classroom was filled with strangely lifeless cries of dismay and complaint.

Teachers did have mandatory curricula, quotas, etc., but... adding extra material to the exams was inevitably going to draw opposition.

That said... all of this was within Kyouhei’s expectations. The difference in teachers’ pace towards the end of the year meant it happened regularly; it wasn’t something to panic over at this point.

Nevertheless...

“...Finals...?”

Why was it, then, that the word rested heavily on his tongue?

Kyouhei wasn’t too worried about his grades.

Normalcy and averageness were the greatest achievements for him, and he was studious in class and fastidious with homework. As a result, there were no issues with his academics.

So why...?

“Aw, man, finals again. I don’t get the point of plain events like this,” Mizuhito muttered defeatedly from the neighboring seat.

He’d used spray-dye to color his hair red, and contacts to give himself green eyes. Ink went down from his cheek to his neck. He was an attention-drawing youth, who went as far as possible to stand out, and then a bit further. In most

cases, his looks would have been the start of his downfall, his grades falling in proportion. However, it read almost the exact opposite for Mizuhito. The fashion rocker was actually one of the top five students in the year, so it just went to show that you couldn't judge a person by their looks.

"In which case," Kyouhei muttered back with a sideways glare, "act like a rocker and overthrow the academic rule of society—hand all your tests in blank. It'll make you stand out."

"I can do that?!" Mizuhito exclaimed with a clap. In the next moment, though, his surprised expression morphed into a bold grin. "You're going to have to do better than that," he told Kyouhei. "If my grades dropped, I'd get more issues than benefits."

"Tch," Kyouhei tutted.

Mizuhito was always strangely insightful with that kind of thing.

Well, it was true that his oddities were tolerated because he did all that he should as a student. Essentially, he could continue the lifestyle he had become accustomed to as long as he kept up his marks.

"Oh yeah, reminds me, Kyouhei... How's Pamil-chan doing at school? I guess she'd be fine with English, but what about the other subjects?"

"Eh...?" Kyouhei let out. "...That's what it was!"

He'd finally realized the source of his unease.

Pamil had been attending the same school as him for several months now because of Shuuhei's forgery.

A blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl was bound to stand out, but that wasn't beyond the realms of credulity for people. Her behavior had some oddities to it, but nothing too far beyond the general perception of foreigners.

However, explaining her real abnormality—like the beams she fired from her eyes, or her capacity to stop a truck with a single hand—away with her being a foreigner would lead to some censure from various countries. Fortunately, none of that had been revealed to the public at large.

Keeping that secret was a constant balancing act, though.

And now, Kyouhei faced a new challenge: Finals were an unavoidable establishment that couldn't be fooled, leading to a significant possibility of her strangeness coming to light.

In other words...

"I'll need to check that..." Kyouhei murmured.

● ● ●

For the most part... Pamil had betrayed Kyouhei's expectations. Luckily, the result was wonderful, but even that was sliding away. Away it went.

Well, that said... Kyouhei was still ill at ease today.

They were in the Nanbu house, a warehouse that had been renovated—well, it thankfully happened to have the daily necessities in the corners. It was a huge space with no partitions or layout, piled high with unknown goods.

They were currently in what Kyouhei called his room, an area in the catwalk furnished with the bare minimum—a bed and a desk—that overlooked the rest of the warehouse.

Said desk was loaded with textbooks for Kyouhei to test Pamil's academic prowess, under the pretext of studying for the tests.

And what happened was...

"I take marbles one by one from a bag containing three white marbles and six black marbles, taking the final two out simultaneously. However, as the marbles are not returned to the bag..."

He'd intended a light test.

"If removing a white marble is A and a black marble is B, then:

$$n(A) = 3 \times 8 = 24,$$

$$n(A \subset B) = 3 \times 6 = 18.$$

So, $Pa(B) = n(A) \div n(A \subset B) = 24 \div 18 = 4 \div 3$, but with the question's conditions you can also answer with $Pa(B) = (2+6) \div 6 = 8 \div 6 = 4 \div 3$," Pamil answered instantly.

Her expression didn't flicker in the slightest, and she almost sounded like she

was reading the weather forecast.

The answer was, of course, correct. You could even call it a perfect answer. An absolutely flawless answer that may as well have been her reading out the example answer.

This exchange had continued across the different subjects for nearly an hour now.

Frankly speaking, math, chemistry, physics, English textbooks... were all like child's play for Pamil, even though they were the average high school level.

"...You're... actually pretty amazing," Kyouhei groaned.

Incidentally, Pamil was sitting on the edge of the bed opposite to Kyouhei, without a notepad or book, or even a pen for that matter.

In other words, her answers were immediate, delivered with a monotonous tone like a machine would, and she didn't even need to write, calculate, or refer to any book.

"Hm, I am?" Pamil asked. "My calculation circuits can solve that kind of problem instantly, though."

Pamil, the self-proclaimed body double android of a princess.

Kyouhei still had his doubts about that introduction; it seemed unrealistic that current technology could create someone like her.

Pamil was indistinguishable from a human.

It wasn't just the surface things, like the feel of her skin, or her bipedal locomotion; her behavior was also as natural as any human's.

Not just with walking or reaching a hand out to grab things, but also with things like the way she'd tilt her head in question—her actions were all so lively that it was unthinkable a machine was carrying them out. She was distinctly different from the pet and cleaning robots on the market. For those, wall avoidance or automatically going back to the socket to charge were blatantly programmed responses.

Frankly, it was impossible.

For an android to act as naturally as her, it would require a vast amount of calculations: to determine the center of gravity, to develop spatial awareness... And for them to be done in real time...

Stuffing a computer that was capable of those calculations, and the battery to power it for 24 hours, into her slight frame seemed completely unrealistic with modern technology. Furthermore, taking into account the actuators and motors necessary to act on those calculations made it seem even more unlikely.

That was why Kyouhei had dismissed her introduction as “a bit of fantasy from a crazy girl.”

But...

Calculation circuits...

...On the off chance... If Pamil *did* have a super-high-speed calculation system that could carry out those calculations, then it could be as she claimed. In that case, instantly solving a high-school math problem was nothing worth mentioning.

“...Well then... Let’s move on to the next subject,” Kyouhei continued, still not convinced. The looming exams were more important than the truth about Pamil right now.

And that’s when...

“Well, you’ve got no problems with the sciences, so it’s the humanities next,” Kyouhei told her, his tone of voice filled with optimism.

Math, physics, chemistry... everything had been perfect up to now. There was no doubt in his mind that Pamil was uncommonly intelligent.

At this rate, the tests would be a walk in the park for her. Actually, she could end up getting full marks in all the subjects—first place in her year wasn’t a far-off dream. Kyouhei’s thoughts laid in that direction. Although that would certainly draw attention, which could be an issue.

“First, Japanese history,” Kyouhei started. Just in case, as he thought of preliminary questions, he went with a middle-school level one: “What year was the Taika Reform?”

Her answer... was silence.

This was the first hesitation Pamil had shown after countless questions answered, with barely time to breathe between question and answer.

“Pamil...?” Kyouhei asked, looking up at her again to see a puzzled expression on her face.

“What’s the Taika Reform?” she asked.

“Huh...?” Kyouhei’s eyes narrowed down to points at the surprising question.

For an instant, Pamil, Kyouhei, or both of them even, thought they had misheard.

“You know, the Taika Reform. It was—” Kyouhei began.

“There was a man named Taika who did something bad, was punished, and then made up for it?” Pamil asked with an expression of confusion on her face.

Kyouhei fell silent.

But this... was just the beginning.

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Thirty minutes later.

Pamil’s prior performance had suddenly hit a roadblock.

The classics, modern Japanese, Japanese history—every humanities subject had been disastrous.

“In 607 CE, what did Prince Shoutoku send to Sui for diplomatic reasons?”

The answer was, of course, the envoy to the Sui Dynasty.

“Hmm, in 607 CE, there was the creation of New Monat Technology in the Bergmann Kingdom. The king at the time, king Diga Terrill Torrill Bergmann, established the Royal Academy to commemorate the scientific disc—”

“I’ve told you, we’re doing *Japanese* history!” he cried out over Pamil’s prideful recitation of the Bergmann Kingdom’s history.

“Hmm... but in the Bergmann Kingdom—” Pamil began defiantly before Kyouhei talked over her again.

“There aren’t going to be questions about the Bergmann Kingdom on a Japanese exam!”

“Hm... I see. How unfortunate. In that case, then, the only thing in the 600s I can think of is Muhammad founding Isla—”

“Japanese history!”

The desk was covered... covered in textbooks for classics, Japanese language and Japanese history, and corresponding printouts.

That was the proof of Kyouhei’s astonishment and anguish over the last 30 minutes.

“The classics! Modern language! Japanese history as well! And you’re utterly hopeless at them all?!” Kyouhei cried, tossing the history textbook to the desk. “How did you even pass the entrance exams?!”

“Well, Shuuhei said something to the principal and I passed. He’s brilliant at diplomacy.”

Indeed, Shuuhei had done his thing (so to speak) with the entrance exams.

“...That damn old man,” Kyouhei groaned, falling forward onto the mound of textbooks.

Shuuhei’s absurd skills had certainly been of help once or twice, but using them when they weren’t needed was a problem in several ways. He’d have to force the meaning of ‘legitimate’ into the no-good old man’s head at some point.

I let my guard down...

Pamil’s fluency in Japanese had made him forget... but Pamil was lacking the concept of common sense as a whole. Kyouhei had to check everything, even what he thought of as self-evident.

“This is bad... This is really bad...” he muttered to himself.

As perfect as her abilities in the other subjects—the sciences—were, her failures in the humanities would show up all the more.

Normally, her needing to repeat a year because of failing the tests wouldn’t

have been an issue for Kyouhei, but the extra attention from the teachers and other students would certainly be a problem.

“Pamil!”

“Hm?”

Kyouhei gripped her dainty shoulders tightly and looked deeply into her blue eyes.

“I’m begging you, learn Japanese history properly, we’ll be in real trouble otherwise,” he implored her.

“There’ll be trouble?” Pamil asked confusedly, prompting Kyouhei to start sweating.

“How could there not be?!”

“I mean, tests are to discover a person’s academic abilities, are they not? In that case, I *do not* know Japanese history. I only have the answer of *not* having an answer... Then the marks on the test will inform what I should be stu—”

Kyouhei grunted.

Why’s she sensible with this kind of thing after all this craziness?

“Actually, Japanese finals are... Well, they’re to see how much of the material you’ve memorized. Getting under a certain number of marks is an issue in several ways. So, it’s not too late yet; read the history and classic books cover-to-cover, and memorize the printouts from class!”

“But memorizing them doesn’t mean that I’ve understood them,” Pamil frowned, still not getting it.

“That’s what I mean! Don’t bother with that logic! That’s just what Japanese tests are like!” Kyouhei yelled over her.

“Hm... They’re not? What an odd culture.”

Hearing that from Pamil held a lot of finality in more than one way. Well, it wasn’t like Kyouhei hadn’t had his own doubts about the Japanese school system’s focus on cramming knowledge into its students.

However...

“Didn’t you say ‘when in Rome, do as the Romans do’ before?”

“Hm... I did,” she answered with a small nod. “Right, got it. If you say I should, I’ll memorize it.”

• • •

After this and that, the next day had dawned.

It was now the break just after second period.

The evening before, Kyouhei had demanded Pamil that she cram the textbooks’ contents into her mind, so she was indeed conscientiously reading the books.

However, she was not alone—there were two girls at her side.

Youko Minebe and Sanae Murata. They were the girls closest to Pamil in her class. Youko had suggested that she would make better progress working in a group, so the three of them had placed their chairs around a desk.

“Youko, how do you read this?” Pamil asked, pointing at the words on a page of her classics book.

Youko peered at the words above Pamil’s pale finger and flapped her hand around. “Ah... it’s one of Sugawara no Michizane’s poems. ‘When the east wind blows, flourish in full bloom, you, plum blossoms! Even though you lose your master, don’t be oblivious to spring...’ It’s addressing a plum tree and telling it not to forget the passing of the seasons once it loses its owner and—if you want to know the stuff about why he recited such a poem, ask Sanae; she’s great at history,” Youko answered, losing interest in the explanation halfway through and looking to Sanae. “She knows a lot about Sugawara no Michizane in particular.”

“You do?” Pamil asked Sanae, turning to face her.

“Ummm... Sugawara no Michizane-san...” she began flusteredly. “He was a really talented person and managed to rise to the rank of Minister of the Right... but then there were people jealous of that... and conspired so he’d be demoted to someplace far away. The reason he recited this poem was to show his heartache at having to leave the house he’d grown to love.”

“So it’s the final words of an official that got demoted in political warfare,” Pamil remarked bluntly.

“But, but, you know,” Sanae continued, her eyes bright for some reason, “Sugawara-san was amazing.”

Sanae was talking as if he was an acquaintance in her neighborhood. She continued on, looking off into the distance dreamily:

“After he was framed... and then died, he returned as one of the strongest vengeful ghosts in Japan and cursed the imperial capital. He caused storms that brought famine, and other things too! They were really amazing curses...”

“Mmhmm...”

“He’s now revered as a god of academics...” Sanae continued with her fist clenched, “but the true Sugawara no Michizane fans see that as an outrage...!”

“They do?”



“I mean, if they want to follow Sugawara-san’s example, they need to end up demoted in a power struggle, right? Instead, they cling to his strength only until it suits them! Not even imitating him all the way... Pride comes before a fall! And then they should become vengeful ghosts, the likes of Taira no Masakado, and curse the capital! If they aren’t willing to follow him that far, then as a true adherent of Suragawa-san, I—”

“Sanae, Sanae,” Youko interrupted her, “it feels a bit risky now, so leave that be for now.”

“R-Right,” she blinked.

“Back to the point,” Pamil questioned the two bluntly, tilting her head, “how did that happen? I understand the power struggles in court, but... how did they decide that the curse or whatever was Sugawara-san’s? If he was elevated to divinity, then a certain amount of political intervention seems likely, but did the statesmen of the time prove some causal connection?”

The other two fell silent and exchanged looks.

Pamil was looking seriously at the two, and Sanae was overwhelmed by the sincerity and opened her mouth:

“Umm... There’s something called Shintoism in Japan... It was deeply connected with politics at the time.”

“What’s Shintoism?” Pamil pressed mercilessly.

“Ummm, ummm... Youko-chan...?!” Sanae clung to Youko’s arm, begging for help.

“Wai... I don’t know exactly what kind of religion it is either!”

Well, that wasn’t the exact issue, but if you’d asked them what the exact issue was, they really wouldn’t have known that.

Explaining the ‘obvious’ was actually a difficult enterprise. After all, you knew it, so it was just self-evident.

“And should politics and religion really be connected? Secularity and democracy are the basic principles of—”

“Uuugh...”

“In the Bergmann Kingdom, that’s specified in the constitution, and from the perspective of a fair rule, royalty—”

“Awawawawa...”

...It was then.

It was then that the bell to signify the start of the next class rang through the school, seemingly in aid of them.

“Religion is—Hmm?”

Pamil stopped her speech as she noticed the two hurriedly sorting things out to leave.

“Ah, class is gonna start, gotta get ready,” Youko said.

“W-We’ll see you later... right, Pamil-chan...?” asked Sanae.

Pamil watched them distantly.

“Hmmm,” she murmured, folding her arms.

Her conclusion...?

“What a mysterious country Japan is, truly unfathomable.”

She really hadn’t gotten it.

● ● ●

“Na... Nanbu-senpai...!” called a gasping voice. Kyouhei stopped reflexively and turned to look. He saw a familiar face, two of them in fact. “H-Help...”

The time was just after school had finished, the place was the street on the way home, right by the school gate.

The setting sun made everything feel languid, and the path from the school gate was crowded with students heading home.

Amongst them, Sanae was in Kyouhei’s line of sight. She was shivering like a small creature being chased by a predator.

And next to her, filling the role of chaser, was a beauty with vivid blonde hair and blue eyes, Pamil.

“Wha...”

Kyouhei had been heading to the gate to wait for her as usual, and it wasn't exactly rare for her to be accompanied by Sanae. It was a regular occurrence for the three of them to head home together, in fact.

But... the situation seemed to be different today.

“What's a seasonal word? What's Hikaru Genji? Why is Hikaru in a full name? What's abstinence done for? Why are there no samurai nowadays? What's bushido?”

The rapid-fire questions, more akin to a machine gun than anything, flowed one after another from Pamil. She didn't even take the time to breathe. Whether her knowledge was exhausted or she was simply overwhelmed by Pamil's ferocity, Sanae had just collapsed on the gatepost and was now groaning.

“What're you doing?” he demanded.

“Hmmm?” Pamil looked around in puzzlement before finally noticing Kyouhei. “Oh, Kyouhei, about time.”

“Don't you 'about time' me. What are you doing? *What?*”

“Asking Sanae questions,” she announced proudly, asking for praise with the tone of her voice.

Kyouhei let out a short groan as he understood the situation. “Ahh... I know you're really studious, I get it already, so stop bothering Murata-san.”

“I'm bothering her?” Pamil asked. It obviously hadn't been malicious, but she hadn't even noticed she was bothering Sanae herself.

“Obviously. Murata-san, you don't need to listen to rapid-fire questions like that.”

“Hm, but... I looked over the printouts and textbooks, but there's still a lot I didn't understand just by doing that, though. There's not much time before the exams, so to learn it all—” Pamil defended herself before being interrupted by Kyouhei.

“If it's not in the work set, it won't be on the exam, you don't need to look

that stuff up.”

“But, I—”

“U-Um... Senpai,” Sanae interjected softly, “...why don’t we go to the library...? It’s the best place to study... and we can... look things up that aren’t in the printouts...”

● ● ●

And, more or less like that, an hour later, the three of them were in the library.

The library was like a labyrinth, with books filling bookcases taller than Kyouhei from top to bottom. There was an open space in the middle of the room with three huge desks for the library’s patrons, with 18 seats.

Their presumption was that, with finals looming, there would be many people in the building... However, it seemed that home studying was the trend nowadays, so there was barely anyone around. The only person they could see besides themselves was the librarian at the loans desk, sitting with a book in hand.

Now...

Kyouhei’s gaze dropped to Pamil, who was bathed in the sun that came from a window, and then to the book open in front of her.

To each side of the girl was a tower of dozens of books. Pamil had retrieved each of them from the shelves saying that she needed them. And those words seemed to be no lie—she was silently reading through each in turn.

“She’s seriously going at it,” Kyouhei muttered wryly.

The faint shadows falling across her face from the setting sun cast her sharp features into relief. She certainly had the elegance and grace of a princess as she sat there reading. All in all, that atmosphere raised her to a fantastical beauty.

With a faint smile still on his face, something caught Kyouhei’s attention. As he let out a sigh, he turned to face Sanae where she was sitting next to him. “...Sorry, Murata-san,” he apologized to her.

“Ah, yes? I mean, what?” Sanae sat up straight from where she was vaguely watching him. “Uh... Umm... What for?”

“Well, for her. She’s not got a lick of common sense... so she’s bothered you as well, like at the gate.”

“N-No, that’s not the case at all!” she exclaimed, shaking her head rapidly.

“It’s not? But—”

“I... I... think that Pamil-chan’s a good girl,” Sanae got out. Her face had gone bright red and she couldn’t meet his gaze. “...She definitely is... a bit strange... but she’s not a bad person at all... she’s always serious... and tries her best...”

“Maybe so,” Kyouhei admitted with a reluctant grin.

That was right, Pamil was always serious and going all out. It was a fact that the very same things caused their own share of problems, but there was no doubting her sincerity.

“I’m sure that Pamil-chan... follows what she thinks of as ‘obvious’ and ‘normal,’ but... there are... surprisingly few people that do...” she continued, growing ever redder, “so... um... I can’t really put it into words... but I... really love... people... like that...”

“Ah... y-you do?”

“Y... Yeah...”

Kyouhei felt... somehow embarrassed, and the two of them fell into silence.

They were just talking about Pamil, but with Sanae sitting shyly next to him—and particularly with the word “love” coming from her—it made it feel like she was confessing her love to him.

“Ah... Pamil,” Kyouhei called to try and escape the awkward mood, “let me know if there’s anything you don’t get, alright? I am in the year above you.”

“Hm? Right,” Pamil looked up and nodded. “I’m okay. I’m doing well right now.”

“That’s a good sig—” he started, approaching her. Absently inspecting the book in front of her, he saw figures filled with grids containing black and white

circles... “...Wait a minute!”

Kyouhei stopped her with a cry and picked up the book she was reading to check the cover.

The Go Encyclopedia - Six Conditions for Victory.

“...Excuse me... Pamil-san... what are you reading?” he asked, slipping into a more formal manner due to his confusion.

“Hm? You can’t read those characters?” she asked in turn. “Kyouhei—I mean, Onii-chan, you should study more.”

“No, I can read them.”

“Then you should know. It’s a book on Go tactics.”

He started by taking a deep breath.

Then he checked the cover once more.

“But why! Why are you reading a book on Go?! What happened to studying for the tests?!”

Yelling quietly was a difficult skill.

“Hm, why are you angry, Kyouhei? I’m learning a lot from this.”

“You might be learning, but it’s got nothing to do with the tests, has it?!”

“Everything is connected,” she insisted.

“Like hell is it! We’re studying history! What does Go have to do with tha—”

“Um... Nanbu-senpai...”

Kyouhei turned to see that Sanae had arrived next to him and was pointing at a diagram in the book.

“Maybe it’s... about ancient Kyoto...?” she suggested.

Kyouhei followed her finger, looked carefully again, and then he realized it.

In 794, Emperor Kanmu had designated ancient Kyoto as the capital, constructing several small roads throughout it and dividing it up like a Go board.

Which meant...

“I didn’t know what a Go board was, so I found and read something with a similar title,” she proclaimed rather proudly.

Well, now Kyouhei knew that she wasn’t playing around or slacking off, and certainly was being serious and giving it her all.

She was clearly focusing her efforts in the wrong direction, though...

“Even so, you don’t need to learn how to play the game, what you need to focus on are the tests themselves!”

“Hmm, but,” she protested with a cute pout, “even if I learn what’s on the sheets, I’d just be memorizing what the words look like; I won’t know how to answer the questions if I can’t understand them.”

“If you keep reading this book like that, though, there’ll be no end! Just memorizing things already takes enough time, bu—”

“I’m finished though?” she declared smoothly. “I’ve finished inputting all the data in the textbooks and printouts for Japanese history, the classics, and modern Japanese.”

“...Huh?” Kyouhei let out almost reflexively. “That’s impossible.”

“Hm, you don’t believe me?”

“It’s... nothing to do with belief or not. I mean, yesterday...”

Yesterday, she had known nothing.

Memorizing that much in just a day—or actually, merely a few hours—was impossible...

“Hm. You clearly *do* doubt it. I shall have to prove it. I will now output the chronological data from Pre-eras to the Taisho era.”

And as she had said, Pamil began reciting it.

Sonorously.

Kyouhei’s jaw hit the floor.

He knew that Sanae had frozen in shock next to him as well, but he couldn’t

move at all.

The words streamed fluidly from Pamil’s lips, unceasingly, and almost like a song.

And finally...

-----.

-----.....

“...Puh...”

The words were flawless.

Pre-eras, then the pre-ceramic Jomon period, then the Kofun period where there was negotiation with China through the Lelang Commandery, the Asuka period, the Black Ships arriving in Uraga to force the removal of Japan’s isolationist policies, the diplomatic relations with various countries causing a revolt in the Meiji period, and finally the First World War.

It was all of it. She had memorized nearly all of Japan’s history. She hadn’t hesitated or faltered even once, and had spoken almost as if they were obvious truths.

Of course, even Kyouhei couldn’t verify it all, but as far as he knew, she hadn’t gotten anything wrong... He involuntarily looked around for help, and saw Sanae. She had a hand to her mouth in disbelief as she nodded. Everything Pamil had recited was probably right as far as she knew as well.

“Pamil-chan... you’re amazing...” Sanae sounded like she’d just watched an incredible opera and was moved to tears.

However...

“You learned all that in a single day?” Kyouhei asked in wonder.

“I did,” Pamil smiled back at him. “You told me to memorize it, so I input each and every word into my memory. It would take too long to recite it all, so I only quoted up to the Taisho period, but if it’s in the textbooks, I remember it. I also

memorized the Man'youshou and Kagerou Nikki.”

A moment passed.

Honestly, Kyouhei was terrified.

There was a limit to ‘a good memory.’ Having intelligence and ability was one thing, but this was simply inhuman.

Is she actually a robot...? That worry had been a common one for Kyouhei. No, he decided; that wasn’t the root of the problem. He felt uneasy... almost as if he’d made a huge misunderstanding.

Abnormal memory and overwhelming firepower.

That was the kind of existence now living amongst humans. It was like a tiger cub being part of a clowder of cats. You couldn’t single it out at a glance, but once the tiger got serious, it’d tear through the cats in seconds. At the end of the day, it was still a tiger, even if it was small.

Pamil’s not a bad person, but...

But she was beyond humans in every way, even while living amongst them. Was that anything but a threat to normal people...?

“H-Hey... in that case, Pamil-chan,” Sanae asked excitedly, heedless of Kyouhei’s terror, “what is... the system of governance where powerful clans ruled hereditarily and their family names were proof of social position?”

It was silly asking such a simple question, in Kyouhei’s opinion. There were already several hints in the question itself, but the answer was of course the System of Clans and Hereditary Titles.

Pamil nodded at her classmate’s question and then spoke:

“Nobility.”

Kyouhei felt himself pitch forward by maybe 30 degrees, but he managed to catch himself on the desk.

“You... It was in that chronology you recited!” he exclaimed.

“Hm, it was?” Pamil asked in confusion.

Seeing her bewilderment, he realized what she’d meant by her earlier words

of “I won’t know how to answer the questions if I can’t understand them.”

Essentially, Pamil had memorized everything and not understood the actual contents at all. It was no different than a parrot or a dictaphone—she was just outputting exactly what had been input.

In other words, she couldn’t use the knowledge she’d learned.

He understood the logic. He did, but...

“How do you remember things like that...?!”

“Hm, is there a prob—”

“There’s a huge one!” he couldn’t help but yell, earning a glare from the librarian. He lowered his voice before continuing: “...I get it. I *reeeeallly* get it.”

“Hm? Kyouhei?”

Kyouhei pulled a book titled *The Great Clans - and Their Lineage* from the piles atop the desk. He then flipped through the pages, checking what was written within.

Then...

“Let’s start from the basics, Pamil.”

Telling her to just memorize things was no use. It wasn’t a matter of quality, just a fundamental difference in abilities.

A normal person would have several hooks when they learned about a word or concept.

For example, the word ‘dog’ would bring up several memories for a person, as well as various pieces of knowledge related to them. They might be memories of being barked at, or maybe of crying when a pet dog died, or even simply of seeing a dog on TV. There were even people that would link the concept of ‘dog’ with the police.

A single memory was linked to countless others.

But...

She... doesn’t have any of those memories...

Pamil's experiences came to a sum total of a few months in her memories. Much like an infant's, so to speak.

The knowledge she had accumulated was just pure information. It was ridiculously unbalanced! She wasn't superior; she was just peculiar—unavoidably so.

That's why...

I'll have to keep an eye on her...

It wouldn't be easy. She was a peculiar individual living amongst normal people; there were things that she would need to learn. Things that couldn't just be learned via data entry. Memorizing wasn't living and experiencing things; the experience of living needed to be gained via exchanges with others.

"The great clans was the title of the influential natives during the transition between the Kofun and Yamato periods... When the Ritsuryo system came into effect, they were brought into the imperial courts and became known as nobles," he explained to her.

"Why did the name change? Wouldn't that be confusing?"

"I suppose that eras and names exist to demarcate the changes between things. I mean, knights and samurai both served lords and fought, but the image that those two words bring to mind is completely different, right?"

Pamil made a noise of affirmation.

"When people made new governments and systems, changing what names everything went by helped cement that, right? Using the same terms while saying that things had changed would get confusing."

"I see, so changing the designations at the same time as they changed the systems actually helped prevent confusion?" she asked.

"Probably. Shall I carry on?"

"Yes."

"So, when you think of powerful clans like that, they're almost like a prototype of nobility. Those titles came to be used to describe samurai's lineages."

She made another noise of understanding.

...

And so on it went. Kyouhei and Sanae continuously let Pamil 'live' the history of Japan.

● ● ●

Days later, after the exams, the dining table in front of Kyouhei was filled with marked exams.

They all had the name "Harumi Nanbu" on them.

In Latin script, though.

A heavy silence lay over the table.

English, math, and chemistry had all gone by without issue, she'd easily gotten her marks.

However...

"I... overlooked that," Pamil muttered, faced with several exam sheets with red zeroes atop them.

Japanese history, modern Japanese, and the classics.



“...Overlooked it?” Kyouhei asked.

“Indeed...”

She seemed fine, but Kyouhei didn't miss the line of sweat traveling down her cheek.

...In brief, Pamil had used the roman alphabet on all of her exams. But of course, with Japanese history, modern Japanese, and the classics, she needed to write the correct kanji. Writing everything using Latin letters would obviously lose marks.

“Um, well...” she began. Even Pamil seemed to have realized that this was an issue, as her gaze was wandering as she spoke, “I can speak and read fine... but I didn't think it would be so difficult for me to write Japanese. I still take notes in German as well.” She sounded rarely apologetic. She looked up at him carefully, seemingly taking his silence as anger. “...Um, I'm sorry.” Kyouhei didn't reply. “I wasted all of your and Sanae's help and I truly—” she began apologizing.

“Pamil,” Kyouhei interrupted her with a deep sigh.

Tests and exams, in most cases, would serve the purpose that Pamil had once described earlier; they would have been used to show what the examinee didn't understand.

Therefore, getting low marks wasn't necessarily a bad thing. They could happen because of carelessness, like laziness or procrastination. At the end of the day, you just needed to make sure that the same thing didn't happen again, that was all. If low marks let you know what you had problems with, then they certainly weren't a waste.

Whether she's a machine or just crazy...

Whatever the case, if she saw her failures as failures, and felt a sense of responsibility because of them, then that was proof that she would put the effort in for the next time.

So... the only thing that Kyouhei could do was to answer those feelings himself.

“We'll practice writing from tomorrow on,” he told her.

“Ah...” Pamil blinked at him, then smiled widely. “Right, that’s perfect!”

Chapter 3 - Royalty Prohibition Charter

Kyouhei Nanbu had an ideal, a dream—you could also call it a goal in life. Others might consider it anticlimactic, and even advise him to find something bigger to shoot for, but it was important to him.

It was peace.

Normalcy.

Many might not think of it as a cause worth championing, and it is no exaggeration to call it a bizarre desire for a teenage boy. Normally, boys of his age would be looking to step out from the crowd of ‘extras’ and become the protagonist of their own epic tale.

Kyouhei, however, had experienced being on the verge of death on several occasions with his father, who would get involved with smuggling and forgery. Shuuhei was like an embodiment of law-breaking and recklessness. As a consequence, Kyouhei now had a poignant desire to recover his peace and quiet. He didn’t ask for much, just some tranquility. He’d even settle for avoiding the most egregious things, the pointless attention, the hardships that came from standing out, and the work of dealing with the aftermath of disaster...!

Well, it was a rather first-world problem.

The best-laid plans often go awry, though.



“Would you enjoy some strawberries, Princess?” the friendly greengrocer opened the conversation.

“...Excuse me?” Kyouhei asked reflexively, eyes narrowing to pinpricks.

Of course, in Japan there was no monarchy. There was therefore no one who would go by that title. *Absolutely no one. Absolutely, positively, no one.* Kyouhei’s thoughts sounded like an incantation as they swirled around his

mind.

Heedless of this, the greengrocer continued: “We have some splendid strawberries today, and they’re rather good value, how about it?”

“...Umm,” Kyouhei groaned out as he felt a trail of cold sweat make its way down his back, “...so, I don’t want to believe it, but are you talking about my sister here, Harumi Nanbu?”

“That’s right, Her Highness.”

The spring sun bathed the storefront in light. It was a nostalgic, elegant scene, and stereotypically Japanese; the prototypical local store.

Shopping districts of this ilk had been losing customers to huge supermarkets and department stores recently, but they were still persevering. Particularly at this time of the year, when they would hold events they called “spring festivals.” The seasonal stands would draw customers back, along with the street performers that the neighborhood association hired to act as landmarks. There were students wearing casual clothes and making the most out of their holidays, and a fair few shoppers had arrived with the early afternoon hour.

It was an average, normal scene. So much so that Kyouhei could relax into it and take his fill of the atmosphere.

And yet, the greengrocer’s careless remark had shifted him into another dimension, blowing his beloved normalcy away from him at supersonic speeds.

“Strawberries? Would those be *erdbeeren*, storekeeper?” The reply came not from Kyouhei, but from the girl at his side, Pamil.

She had fine, golden hair falling around her shoulders, and clear blue eyes that looked like sapphires. Her skin was as smooth as silk, and each and every feature she had refined her charm. She gave off an air of otherworldliness, like an antique doll. She was still too young to be called a beautiful woman; the rounded curves of her body still had room to develop. Even so, she stood out in the shopping district. Excessively so.

She was wearing a baggy sweater with stripes across it, along with a tartan skirt. Her feet were clad in ankle boots. The intent had been to make her look plainer... but changing her clothes made virtually no difference. In fact, it had

done the exact opposite—the contrast between her looks and her outfit drew attention all the more. Regardless of anything else, she would stand out in an area like this, filled with Japanese people, what with her blonde hair and blue eyes.

...As could easily be seen by the greengrocer having committed her to memory after only two short months.

“Here, here,” he insisted, presenting a plastic pack piled with strawberries to her.

“Wow, what wonderful *erdbeeren*!”

“Would you care to sample them?” the greengrocer asked.

“Sample?”

“Well, you see,” the greengrocer said with a slightly impish grin and a friendly bow, “I, a lowly greengrocer, wish to present these freshly picked strawberries to Your Highness. If they are to your liking, we could come to an arrangement.”

He placed a vibrant strawberry on Pamil’s hand as she nodded deeply. He then also sprinkled some sugar across it, which he had retrieved from somewhere.



“I see then,” Pamil agreed, ferrying the strawberry to her mouth and chewing it. After tasting it in full, she then nodded, saying: “Indeed, exquisite.”

“I am honored by your praise, Princess.”

“Hm, what’s wrong, Kyouhei?” Pamil asked, noticing his silence. Her head was tilted like an adorable bird. “The storekeeper is right; it is indeed exquisite. You should sample them too.”

He remained silent, though.

He was actually just in shock from the unexpected development... but Pamil took it another way.

“Hmm? I see,” she said with a nod after looking at the shopping bags in Kyouhei’s hands, “you want me to feed you?” Then, Pamil went to put a strawberry in Kyouhei’s half-open mouth with an “Open wide.”

“No! That isn’t the...” Kyouhei exclaimed as he flinched back.

“Hm? You really are selfish... Oh well,” she sighed, putting the strawberry between her lips and stretching out as if to kiss him with an “Ngh.”

“I said no!” he cried with bright red cheeks.

“Hmm... You’re not even happy with mouth-to-mouth? That’s a bother. You aren’t a child, so you should be able to eat one or two *erdbeeren* on your—”

“I said that’s not it! Anyway, why’re you answering to ‘Princess’ without even batting an eye?!”

“Hmm? Is there something strange about that?”

“Obviously there is!” Kyouhei yelled at her question.

Kyouhei lived his life by the principles of normalcy, averageness, and mediocrity. Therefore, he had tried to keep Pamil’s abnormalities away from the public eye.

Of course, that included keeping an eye on her when she was in the shopping district and making sure she didn’t do or say anything weird.

At the very least, Kyouhei always introduced her as his sister whenever asked. He had never said anything about her being a princess, a noble from another

country, an android body double of a princess that fires beams from her eyes, nor talked about the Royal Arrow being a supersonic wave, or about the Royal Cutter pulverizing rock. Not once.

And yet, the lunatic had clearly said something like, “You can call me Princess,” to the greengrocer. He could never be too careful.

“Now, now, Kyouhei-kun,” the greengrocer interjected with a wry smile, “it’s not an issue. I like calling her Princess; role-playing isn’t too bad once in a while.”

“It’s not fine! And what kind of role-play would that be?!” Kyouhei demanded.

“Like a video game,” he answered readily.

Well, 20 years had passed since the national hit *Dragon Quest* had been released. People were allowed their own hobbies, and it wasn’t exactly strange that the middle-aged greengrocer would be into RPGs. At the very least, it was more normal than the type of role-playing involving whips, candles, and pleas to be stepped on. Kyouhei cursed himself for thinking about that kind of variety immediately... but back to the point.

“Besides,” the greengrocer continued, “it’s already a thing around here. In the shopping district, I mean.”

Kyouhei had already taken a few shocks (in more ways than one), and the old man had just dealt the final blow. He felt the foundation going by the name of “common sense” crumble beneath him as he staggered.

● ● ●

Bam!

A short sound had echoed around the Nanbu household.

It was the sound of Kyouhei slamming a sheet of paper to the table.

It was the sound of a resolute decision.

Several hours had passed since they had been shopping, and it was just after four in the afternoon.

Pamil had been having a late snack, consisting of the strawberries they had bought earlier, at the dining table when she froze due to that sound.

Even she, as strange as she was, noticed the anger and impatience coming off him in waves.

She returned the strawberry to the plate in surprise before speaking: “Kyouhei...” she began tenderly, “do you have some kind of grudge against the table?”

“No I don’t!” he yelled, pushing the paper towards her.

“Hmhmm...?” As Pamil’s eyes found the first line written on the paper, her cute little eyebrows furrowed together.

“Royalty Prohibition Charter” was written atop it.

Pamil looked up at him in question and received a large nod in return.

She took the sheet and her head tilted further as her eyebrows drew even closer together.

Royalty Prohibition Charter

Firstly, usage of the words 'royalty,' or 'princess' is forbidden.

Secondly, usage of eye beams, lightning, superhuman strength, and other such abilities is forbidden.

Thirdly, behaving as royalty with others is forbidden.



And so it went... an itemized list of forbidden things.

“What is—” Pamil began.

“I realized it all weeeellll and good earlier,” Kyouhei spoke over Pamil’s confused question. “I’ve underestimated things. I’d just meant to tell you not to use royal powers or stuff in front of people, but there’s a more fundamental problem. You keep going on and on about being a princess and acting like it, so the storekeepers have caught on!”

“Hmm, but acting like this is my default program,” she protested.

“Shuuuut it!” Kyouhei yelled, a vein pulsing on his temple. “You shouldn’t just stand out for no reason! We can’t help you being a foreigner, but we’ll get worse attention if you keep acting like a weirdo that says they’re a princess or noble all the time, won’t we?! There’s a time and a place; a time and a place! Japan doesn’t even have royalty or nobility!”

“But, Kyouhei, Japan has the Impe—”

“No royalty or nobility! And using that is even worse, so quit it!” he cried, pointing a finger at her face.

“Hmm, but Kyouhei, I was made as a body double android for the princess of the Bergmann Kingdom, and...” she continued.

Well, that was just to be expected. She had maintained her claims ever since they had met. There was probably no exaggeration to calling it the foundation of her personality.

However... just leaving it be would likely lead to some kind of trouble he’d rather avoid. Pamil’s paperwork had all been arranged through Shuuhei’s specialty: extra-legal methods. If the police investigated the details, then there were a multitude of things that couldn’t be explained away.

Regardless, taking into account Shuuhei’s hobbies and profession, it would be a problem in another way for them to stand out.

“Anyway, the word ‘royal’ is forbidden! So is saying ‘princess’! You’re living as my sister, so act like it from now on!”

Pamil hunched over at Kyouhei’s menacing expression. A line of sweat ran

down one of her pale pink cheeks. "...But, I... But..." She looked left and right, searching for a way out, but there was none to be found. "...Very well, there's no choice."

Her slumped acknowledgment was three minutes later.

● ● ●

The spring sun blazed in the skies above. The life-giving light poured over the town, filling every nook and cranny with a pleasant warmth.

"...Strange," came a voice from within the warmth.

The source of that remark, one that normal people would respond to with a "You're the strange one," was a gloomy-looking girl lurking in the shadow of a telephone pole.

The whole country was covered in glorious sunshine, but around her, the air felt stagnant. If you had ghost or magic detecting gear, then in front of her it'd probably wail like a Geiger counter in a nuclear reactor.

"Something... happened...!" she realized.

The girl had anachronistic bobbed hair and perfectly round glasses that looked custom ordered. If you were to ask people if she was good looking, most people wouldn't say no. Looking properly at her let you see that she actually had rather attractive features. However, her entire being felt like it was gesturing at the shadows behind the school building and saying "I like it here," ruining the overall effect.

This was Sanae Murata.

She was wearing, fittingly for the spring holiday, her casual clothes. A casual blue dress with slender sandals around her feet. This much was normal, but the bag hanging from her shoulder was not. In the bag were items stored in preparation for... 'something,' perhaps. They included a strawman, a metal stake, and other sorcerous implements.

It went without saying that the target of her passionate attention was Kyouhei. Sanae's entire reason for being was stalking—or rather, keeping him under heavy surveillance—so even during the holidays, she continued her

routine.

Sanae's actions had already become something slightly different than love or courage, although perhaps they had started out that way. But unfortunately, that time Youko Minebe wasn't there to interject with that; she was on vacation after all.

"...Senpai... Nanbu-senpai..." A girl in love's powers of observation should never be underestimated, but in Sanae's case, whether you called it a needless focus or an obsession, she was sensitive to even the slightest changes around Kyouhei Nanbu. "...What happened...?"

He had his glossy black hair, his fine jaw, and his knightly features (through her maiden filter), with his eyebrows describing an intellectual arc, and his cool eyes—

Kyouhei hadn't changed overly much; as he walked through the town, his wonderful looks (from Sanae's perspective) were the same as ever.

But...

"...Pamil-chan...?"

Pamil was walking next to him, a girl that had appeared out of nowhere one day as his 'sister.' However, that day she had a somewhat depressed expression on her face.

There was a slight vertical line in between her eyebrows, and her eyes were constantly directed at her feet. She seemed almost frail, especially with how overly confident she normally looked, like she'd be bothered by a call for her. Now her face looked like she was a student with no English skills that had suddenly been accosted by a foreigner. Kyouhei was looking back at her, over and over, as if he was checking something.

It appeared as nothing but... him spoiling her.

It was without a doubt a scene of a "weak sister clinging to her kind brother."

There had been no sign of that up until yesterday, though.

Which meant...

"...Something... definitely happened, didn't it...?"

Between the two of them, that is. Something had changed in their relationship...!

Being siblings aside, they were still of the opposite sex, and Pamil was so utterly adorable.

Kyouhei was a man, so living under one roof with such a beauty might well drag him to the limits of his rationality, Sanae thought.

“H-Have... Have they sprinted across the first line...?!” Sanae muttered somewhat brokenly to herself. She staggered into the telephone pole, as if her own fantasy had physically struck her.

“...No, no, Sanae,” she told herself, “you swore to believe in them... But... But it bothers me... it does... I need to calm down... but...”

After a while spent worrying, Sanae spoke up again: “Calm down... I know, I can use the portable one I bought earlier...”

Sanae pulled some poles and planks from her bag, which, while small, would have given a normal person pause for thought as to how she got them in. She then began putting them together, before eventually pulling out a string and lighting a fire in the hearth at its center. She then began muttering, or rather praying, for things like “Sisters are forbidden,” “Getting ahead is forbidden,” and other such pleas as she tossed small wood chips into the fire.

...On the street. Next to a telephone pole.

And then...

“Oh, dear, take a look at that,” murmured half of a passing couple.

“Oh my,” the woman answered in kind, “a bonfire when it’s this warm?”

“No, dear, it’s a fire altar.”

“That’s impressive for her age...”

“I wonder if she’s from the Tendai sect, or maybe the Shingon?”

“I hear Zoroastrianism is popular nowadays?”

“There’s a lot of depth to religions with fire worship, huh?”

...

Surprisingly, and unfortunately for Kyouhei, normal people might just be an abstract existence in the world today.



They met a familiar face in a corner of the shopping district.

“Oh my... my my my?”

They were five buildings down from the greengrocers they had visited yesterday, at a shop specializing in black tea. Kyouhei had recognized the car at the storefront, so he had looked inside to find Kaoruko Houwa.

The woman was the young owner of the Corvette café. If you were to sum her up in a single phrase, it would be “a peaceful beauty.” Simply being around her put anyone at peace—she was a soothing person.

She had long brownish hair that was tied up in a ribbon, and was wearing a knitted shirt and denim skirt. It was her usual outfit, but being out of the café, she wasn’t wearing her apron, of course.

“Kyouhei-kun, Pamil-chan, what a surprise...” Kaoruko said before correcting herself, “...Well, not quite, but hiii.”

They did live in the same town, so it wasn’t particularly odd to run into each other on the streets.

The tea shop they were in looked old, as in old-fashioned. The furniture all looked like antiques, and the lighting along with its color gave a dim orange glow to the interior.

They were trading, but it seemed more focused on people in the trade business rather than the general public, so the furnishings were probably just the owner’s tastes.

Back to the point, though.

“Oh, a state visit. Are you shopping with your brother?” asked the old storekeeper from past the counter behind Kaoruko. He smiled gently, like he was greeting his granddaughter.

Pamil’s answer was rather inarticulate, though. “Y-Yes... well.” She then looked back uneasily at Kyouhei and received a nod. “Ah, well,” she continued,

“I’m... not a princess. I’m Harumi Nanbu, or well, that’s...”

““My name,” Kyouhei prompted.

“...My name...” Pamil added at his guidance.

The storekeeper and Kaoruko exchanged glances at the strange atmosphere between the two teens.

“Pamil-chan, what’s wrong?” Kaoruko asked.

“You seem a little odd today, Princess,” the storekeeper added.

“Well... some stuff happened...” Kyouhei mumbled vaguely, with a strained smile.

Kaoruko looked oddly at them for a few moments, but then spoke: “Ah, right. You’ve got perfect timing,” she exclaimed, pointing to the small tin on the counter. It was an aluminum box, with “Earl Grey Original Blend” printed on it. “I thought I might change the leaves we use at the café, so I came shopping. People won’t get tired of our tea if we change it up with the seasons.”

Kyouhei let out a sound of admiration.

She then continued: “The smell’s a big part of enjoying tea, right? So I was going to use the tester to see what it was like... but the last customer put the lid on really tight, so I can’t open it...”

Kyouhei then took the offered tin with a sigh.

The lid was a disc atop the angular body of the tin, not sticking out at all. It was more like a design on top of the tin than a lid. Looking closely, he could see that it protruded ever so slightly.

He slid a nail under the rim and tried lifting it... but it was as if it’d been pinned down into place.

“Yeah... this isn’t moving at all,” Kyouhei admitted.

“So you can’t get it off either,” Kaoruko said, hanging her head. It probably would have been difficult for her and the storekeeper, a woman and an old man respectively, to get it open. “What about you, Pamil-chan?” she asked.

“Indeed, the high output actuators in my arm will easil—”

“That’s mean, Kaoruko-san, there’s no way she could do that,” Kyouhei denied with a forced laugh, elbowing Pamil in the side as he did. “Kaoruko-san’s been dealing with this kind of tin since forever... and I’m a guy; if we couldn’t do it, then you couldn’t either, right, Harumi?”

“B-But, Kyouhei,” she protested.

“No,” he rejected her flatly, “this kind of thing has always been a man’s job.”

He winced slightly at her downtrodden look, but told himself that he needed to harden his heart.

Though, that said...

He’d already seen that it was too hard to open just using his fingers. He considered using a coin, but the gap was too narrow.

There must be something else, Kyouhei looked around for something else to use.

“Oh?” Kaoruko spoke, striding over to the door, having apparently spotted something.

She held herself up against the side of the door, like a special forces squad about to infiltrate a room a criminal had shut themselves up in, before reaching out just her hand and opening the door.

“Uhyaah...?!”

A girl fell down onto the floor with a painful-sounding thud, along with her scream. She must have been leaning on the door outside.

“Murata-san...?” Kyouhei muttered as he looked at the girl twitching on the floor.

With another yell, Sanae flicked herself up from the floor like a click beetle into a kneeling position.

“I-I’m okay... I wasn’t doing anything, um... I really wasn’t. I didn’t panic when I was following you and Pamil-chan and lost sight of you, and I wasn’t peeking into shops looking for you, okay?!”

Kyouhei sighed.

“You dropped something,” he told her, looking around her.

Her bag had burst open when she fell, the contents spilling out.

There were candles, a nail... amongst other things.

“Ahhhhh... T-Those are...!”

“...Is that a nail?” asked Kyouhei, picking it up. “What’s... What’s a nail doing in a girl’s bag?”

“Um, that’s, uh, um, I use it to, uh, not with a strawman... right, I do woodwork! I do woodwork as a hobby! Ah hah, hah, ahahaha!” Sanae said desperately.

Kyouhei sighed again. He didn’t think that fit her image, but decided not to question others’ hobbies.

That’s when...

“Murata-san?” he asked, staring steadily at the nail.

“Y-Yes...?!”

“Can I borrow this for a minute?”

“Wha...?”

Then, with a pop, the lid came off the tea tin.

A thick coin wouldn’t, but the pointed tip of a nail easily got between the lid and the tin. Then, all he needed to do was use it as a lever.

“Thank you, Kyouhei-kun, I appreciate it!”

Kyouhei passed the tin to Kaoruko and then looked back to Pamil.

“See?” he asked her.

Pamil was silent. He’d meant it to say “A girl doesn’t need superhuman strength in day-to-day life, see?”

“Pamil-chan?” Sanae called to her.

“...Ah, it’s... nothing,” she answered with a blank expression, shaking her head.



Accidents were sudden things in most cases. It was that suddenness that made them accidents; if there was a clear sign beforehand, then someone could do something about it.

Therefore, as many that went before it, this accident also happened out of nowhere.

“...What?!”

Screams sounded through the shopping district, as well as an almighty crash.

Kyouhei and the others stood there in confusion for a moment, but then immediately left Kaoruko’s side to go outside.

“That’s...”

The accident had happened several meters away, in front of a shuttered store.

There was a performer dressed as a clown sprawled on the floor.

They had seen that performer before, or rather, passed by his performance before they entered the store.

He had been juggling nearly a dozen plastic balls as he walked around smoothly, so that you could feel the skill needed as he spun the balls through the air.

Now, though...

The balls were scattered away from their owner, and one of them was still rolling on the ground until it came to rest by their feet.

There was a huge figure above the clown, in the form of an angel over two meters in height. It had been a decoration on the wall of the shop.

“It’s fallen!” someone screamed.

It had been hanging on a wall, so it probably wasn’t metal or stone, but if it was used as signage, then it would still be relatively hard. And even if it was made out of light materials, put enough of them together for a two-meter humanoid figure, and it certainly wouldn’t be light anymore.

Having that fall on your head could easily be enough to be lethal.

The clown trapped beneath it was motionless. The people around were filled with the premonition of a grisly end to the man.

“It’s dangerous, you two stay here!” Kyouhei warned the two girls with him before running off.

He was probably going to help move the figure. They couldn’t see what state the clown was in, but if he’d broken a rib, then leaving the heavy mass on top of him could make it puncture his lung. They had to get it off of him as soon as possible.

But then...

“Pamil-chan?” Sanae addressed her curiously.

Pamil... was standing stock-still with a pale face. It looked like her pretty face was about to twist up into tears, but that might have just been Sanae’s interpretation.

“What’s wrong, Pamil-chan?”

“...I’m...” she groaned out before falling silent again.

Looking at her, Sanae thought that she was concerned about Kyouhei’s safety. He might only be helping to move the heavy figure, but that was still dangerous. He’d probably told them to stay there to avoid them getting caught up as secondary victims.

“Are you worried about Senpai? It’s okay he’ll—”

“No!”

Sanae froze at the sharp yell. “Pamil-chan...?”

“Ah... no...” she said, her eyes falling to the floor and her expression clouding over, “it’s nothing... nothing at... all...”

Her words were muttered towards her feet.

● ● ●

The journey home was tense, and it certainly wasn’t just because of the sun setting in the eastern skies.

Onwards, the three of them trudged.

After the ruckus in the shopping district, Sanae had ended up joining them on their way home.

“I... I’m glad the clown guy wasn’t too hurt,” Sanae said brightly, not being able to stand the heavy atmosphere, but knowing that this wouldn’t help.

The clown wasn’t on the verge of death or anything. The arm of the figure had happened to act as a support, and he’d been stuck in the space between it and the ground. As a result, he’d ended up just having a relatively light impact. He’d gone to the hospital just in case, but he’d got into the ambulance under his own power.

And yet...

“The fixings were, uh, apparently pretty old; that was close.”

There was no response.

“And... um...” Sanae continued.

There was still no response.

“Umm...”

Well, that’s how things had gone.

The source of the heavy atmosphere was Pamil. Her expression had been dark ever since the accident. It hadn’t changed even when Kyouhei returned from helping, and she hadn’t responded at all when either of them had tried to talk to her. That had put Kyouhei in a bad mood as well, so the conversation between them had ground to a halt. Pamil herself seemed to be caught up in her thoughts.

“Ah, I-I know, Senpai, w-why don’t we go for some tea? I know a place that does good ohagi near here.” Sanae sounded like she was struggling to breathe. She must have really been unable to stand the current atmosphere; normally, there’d be no way on earth that she would invite Kyouhei out for tea.

“Y-Yeah, sure, I’m kinda tired,” he agreed. He seemed to have noticed her plight, as he stopped and smiled at her.

But... Pamil had kept walking in silence.

“Pamil?” he called to her.

She then stopped. “...Ah, uh, you...” she mumbled, “you two go ahead. I’ll... head home first. I... remembered something I had to do.”

“Eh, but—” Sanae protested in vain.

Pamil resumed walking, without listening. Rather than her being considerate of the other two... it looked more like Pamil was running away. They watched her grow distant.

Finally, Sanae turned to him: “Uhm... Senpai?”

“Yeah?”

“Um... it might be a bit rude, but... something’s off with Pamil-chan... it’s bothering me. Did... something happen?”

“Ah... yeah...” he admitted with a grimace. He had a fair idea of what had happened.

● ● ●

“A Royalty Prohibition Charter...?” Sanae asked, her acorn eyes blinking behind her glasses.

They were in the Japanese café that she had recommended. It being her favorite café, the interior was dark, like a thick forest, but it gave a calming mood to the place. The ohagi and matcha that came with it were both delicious, and seemed rather cheap, the drink and food coming to 600 yen.

“It’s...” Sanae began with an unhappy expression, looking up at him, “...I understand you want some calm... but... a ‘Royalty Prohibition Charter’ is... a bit...”

He hadn’t expected that reaction. What he’d expected was for Sanae to agree with it, understanding it was for Pamil’s own sake.

Well... various bits of chaos had resulted in both Kaoruko and Sanae knowing the full details about Pamil. They had gone with him to retrieve her after she had been kidnapped, so Kyouhei had decided that talking them through

everything would lead to less confusion.

Therefore...

“But the Bergmann Kingdom doesn’t exist anymore, she’s not a body double android for anyone; she just needs to live as my sister Harumi, doesn’t she?!” Kyouhei’s anxiety over it all had made his voice suddenly grow harsh.

Sanae cowered, but spoke up anyway: “...If I... was just forbidden... from doing any magic at all... I probably wouldn’t know what to do... it’s something I think of as being part of me, so forbidding it... would really...”

She stopped speaking, but he realized what she wanted to say. “I’m at fault then?”

“N-Not quite... but... um...”

Then, a hefty silence filled the space between them.

Whether she had strange powers or not, whether she had the bizarre backstory of the royal family or not, Kyouhei knew that Pamil was herself. He thought he did. That wasn’t what made her who she was, at least there was no reason there for Kyouhei to accept her as his sister.

She was utterly lacking in common sense and would do crazy things. She wasn’t street smart at all, and had an odd innocence to her. She ate and smiled the same as any other girl, and if you looked closely, she was really expressive.

But...

“Ah... I-I’m sorry...!” Sanae cried out, suddenly realizing what she’d said. “...B-But I couldn’t leave her looking so sad... I-I’m sorry, Senpai... you, um... Ah, I’m going home, goodbye, Senpai!” Sanae’s face was bright red as she gave a slight bow and ran off.

Kyouhei was left alone in the café.

It definitely is my fault, he thought to himself.

“Part of her, huh?”

Something she used to define herself; her position in society.

Actually, it didn’t need to be something as grandiose as that. Anyone would

struggle if something they viewed as only natural was denied to them. Even if that denial was intended for the good of the person in question.

The image of Pamil that Kyouhei had in his head—that which didn't need the elements of royalty or body doubles—wasn't actually Pamil. He'd been using the excuse of her being his sister and forgotten to meet her halfway, even if he hadn't realized it.

Suddenly, he started to worry about Pamil. He stood up and headed towards the exit.

"Huh?"

"Ah... um..." muttered Sanae from where she stood with rosy cheeks at the cash register.

"Murata-san?"

"Ah, umm, I need to pay my share."

She'd noticed that she'd left before Kyouhei and forgotten to pay her own share, so she'd come back.

"Ah..." said Kyouhei with a slight smile, "it's fine, my treat."

"But—"

"Think of it as a tuition fee," he joked with a shrug.

"Huh?"

Sanae didn't seem to understand what he meant, and blinked at him in confusion.

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After going through the usual harsh security measures, Kyouhei stopped at the entrance, lost for words. "...Wha..."

Something had been left in the entrance.

A familiar something.

"...Ah, Kyouhei," Pamil said, suddenly appearing from behind the black boxy object. She gave a clumsy smile as she spoke falteringly: "Welcome... home."

“What are you doing?”

The object was the coffin that Pamil had been inside. Well, if you were to believe her claims of being an android, it was probably her transport/management container and interface. It clearly had several bits of machinery attached to it, which lent credence to the latter.



Back to the point.

Pamil was silent, her eyes were downcast and she wouldn't meet Kyouhei's gaze.

"Pamil?"

"I'm getting rid of it..."

"Eh?" Kyouhei asked, not grasping the meaning.

"I'm... Harumi Nanbu," she answered in a faint voice, "not Princess Pamil Terrill Karl Bergmann's body double, or the FR-MC09 'Pamil IX,' so I don't need this... There's no point in keeping it."

Kyouhei was wordless.

"I noticed in the commotion earlier," she continued, "that I... wanted to go help that performer right away, but I couldn't move. I could have easily moved the thing from on top of him. It wasn't that heavy, and I could have used the Royal Beam to pulverize it. But... I couldn't."

"You..."

It was almost certainly because of the prohibition charter that Kyouhei had written.

"I... focused more on being your sister than keeping that man safe."

"No, you—"

"Someone like that isn't fit to rule. They're not fit to be a princess, so I... have no right to call myself that."

Kyouhei had no answer for her.

"I have to choose one or the other, and I'm stuck in the middle. So if I want to be your sister, I need to get rid of everth—"

So that's why she was throwing away everything that was a sign of her past. So she could be Kyouhei's sister tomorrow, she was abandoning what she was the day before.

Ah, I get it, he suddenly realized—he himself was the same.

He got fixated on averageness because he feared that he might regress to what he had been like years prior. He was scared of becoming that person again, a person that would hold a gun—a weapon that would easily take someone’s life—without the slightest unease.

That was why he avoided touching the guns. Why he refused to open up the photo album despite missing his past.

But... that was just a part of him, so he couldn’t get rid of it.

“You don’t need to throw it away,” he told her.

“Eh?”

“I was wrong,” he said with a sigh, resting a hand on her head, “you can be the same way as you were when you came out of there. You can be yourself, so... let’s forget that Royalty Prohibition Charter.”

Her eyes opened wide.

Then...

“Kyouhei...” she said, her expression brightening in joy.

“In exchange, you’ll be learning common sense as long as you’re here. It has nothing to do with being a princess or not; it’s that whole ‘when in Rome’ thing. We’re doing it properly, so make sure you’re ready.”

“R-Right!”

“And...” Kyouhei said with another sigh, knocking on the coffin, “don’t just throw things out. Oversized trash collection needs to be arranged in advance. Put it back.”

...

And that’s how it went. Pamil would be both a princess’ body double android and Kyouhei Nanbu’s adorable sister—today, and tomorrow too.

Chapter 4 - A Brother's Self-Consciousness

She was a gorgeous girl.

Pamil Terrill Karl Bergmann. Her name alone made it clear that she wasn't Japanese. Her falsified records didn't indicate as such, but her appearance blatantly exposed her Northern-European origins: her perfect, porcelain skin, her sparkling eyes like clear sapphires, and her long, straight, and silken gold-colored hair.

There was no fault in her elegant features; she looked like an antique doll crafted by an artist. Her youth made her charming looks stand out, and in a few years, she would undoubtedly become a beauty capable of stealing anyone's breath.

Actually, even now, her still-growing curves and golden hair engendered a sense of indescribable fascination. Her slight body was on the verge between childhood and adulthood, creating a careful balance—a marvel of precious youth.

Oh, how lovely she was!

Her dainty figure brought virgin snow to mind; untainted, unknowing of whether it would remain so, captivating all that beheld—

Anyway, Kyouhei Nanbu had frozen. He was holding the box containing the clothes and towels he was going to wash first thing tomorrow, on his day off. He'd frozen in the middle of the changing room.

"Oh, Kyouhei, you're doing the washing?" Pamil nodded in satisfaction.

She had settled into the role of Kyouhei's younger sister, and the name of Harumi Nanbu on paper, but you couldn't let your guard down around her. She introduced herself as a princess' body double android, and her small stature could fire off flames, lightning, and beams.

"The magazine I was reading the other day," she continued, "had an article about how guys that can do housework are really popular with girls lately,

according to their surveys...”

Kyouhei silently left the changing room and shut the door.

The rooms may have been called a bathroom and changing room, but in the Nanbu household, that just signified spaces with those functions, partitioned off and made of huge concrete blocks. The construction was amateurish and plain as well.

“Hngh... We were in the middle of a conversation, Kyouhei,” Pamil protested.

“...Pamil,” Kyouhei groaned. He had leaned against the door so she wouldn’t just thoughtlessly open it. “I know I’m always going on about it... but try and get a little more common sense,” he implored her.

“Hm? Is something wrong? I was just getting into the bath—”

“That’s not what I’m talking about!” Kyouhei yelled with a twitching cheek at Pamil’s questioning from behind the door. “Girls... um... have things they shy away from, yeah?! Why are you happily standing there nude?!”

“Hmm? Shy? I had heard that Japanese culture put an emphasis on shame and modesty, but I didn’t think it went that far.”

“Ah, you get it,” Kyouhei said in relief.

However...

“But it sure is strange that you wear clothes in the bath; what an odd country.”

“That’s not it!!” he yelled, stamping his foot.

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“*Jugemu Gokou-no Surikire Kaijarisuigyo-no Suigyoumatsu...!*”

Kyouhei had his head in his hands. He was leaning on the table with his elbows as he recited the rakugo *Jugemu* from memory.

The reason was obvious: he was trying to remove the earlier event—or rather, happening, from his mind.

The clock hanging on the wall showed 10:30 p.m. The two of them were alone in the house. And Pamil... Pamil was dozing off on the sofa, with the TV remote

still in her hand. The pajamas she was wearing were originally Kyouhei's, so they hung loosely on her small frame. They had bought more nightclothes in her size, but she said Kyouhei's were more comfortable and nice to sleep in, so she used them more often.

The comfort was good for her, but... the collar was too baggy, and so was liable to fall open and show off her collar bones, so it wasn't as good for the observer, or Kyouhei in this case.



Someone not knowing the context might mistake her innocence for that of a spring lamb tempting the hungry wolf. They might even be tempted to play their role as the wolf and “gobble her up,” so to speak.

Such a thought likely hadn’t entered Pamil’s mind, though... Probably. She was simply lacking shame and common sense; that was why she was so at ease being nude, even in front of Kyouhei. It was also proof that she could let her guard down around him, and he would not betray her trust.

On top of that, while it might only be on paper... she was his sister. Kyouhei wanted to live as normal a life as he could, so he didn’t want to (this has been censored), or (by experts), and then (under the Regulations for the Protection and Nurturing of Youths) like in porn games.

And thus... Kyouhei was reciting *Jugemu* to send his little one between his legs to sleep. Said little one was currently heedless of his owner’s wishes, and had perked up in a disgraceful show of physiological reactions.

“Actually... if she had a bit more self-consciousness as a girl...” he muttered, just as his reason won the tug of war against his instincts.

Maybe then he wouldn’t have these hardships.

“Paaaathetic!” came a yell on the heels of Kyouhei’s words. “The far more fundamental problem is yours as her broooooother!”

Kyouhei started and looked up, only to be hit in the face by some sort of nylon rope. He then leaped back, clutching his nose.

A figure descended where he’d been standing with a thwiping noise, like a special forces soldier rappelling from a helicopter. Ignoring such petty trifles as the current location being inside a home, there stood...

“Dad!” Kyouhei yelled at the man, still holding his nose.

Kyouhei’s father, Shuuhei Nanbu. He was committing crimes by the dozens—including smuggling, forgery, and other such illegalities—under the title of International Trader.

Shuuhei was wearing an unusual outfit, though that itself was rather normal for him. It was Japanese clothing, black from head to toe. He had leggings

wrapped around himself and straw sandals on his feet. He was also wearing a hood, and even his hands were covered in fabric.

Indeed, it was a ninja outfit.

And as if that wasn't enough, the headband covering his forehead had a metal plate sewn into it with the word "father" engraved on its surface.

"How did you get in?!" Kyouhei yelled at his father.

The house had military-grade security. Taking into account the number of things inside that had to remain hidden, that much went without saying, but even the owner shouldn't be able to just waltz on in.

"Foolish indeed. This home may boast the highest security possible, but the one to set said system up was none other than me. It was child's play to disable the alarm and enter through the hidden roof access!"

"Then there's no point to that security!"

"More importantly, Kyouhei, I'm disappointed in you!"

"And I'm disappointed in your humanity!"

"Silence!" Shuuhei yelled, "Quit nitpicking over little stuff like that!"

'Little' stuff aside, Shuuhei was more energetic than usual, and Kyouhei's flinch let Shuuhei keep pressing the issue:

"What a mess! Even though you can say saccharine things like 'she just needs to live as my sister!'" The familiar phrase made Kyouhei freeze. "Before complaining about Pamil not having enough self-consciousness as a girl or as your sister, take a good look at your own as a brother! That's what your dad thinks!" Shuuhei added.

"How... did you hear that?"

"Obviously, I was hoping—I mean, *worried* about something happening between the two of you. Siblings or not, you are both of an age where *many things* might happen! That's why I bugged all the rooms and daily necessities! I can watch all your happy-embarrassing moments together!"

"Remove them right now!" Kyouhei yelled, a vein throbbing on his forehead

at Shuuhei's pride with himself.

"Oh, so you're planning on waiting 'til you're out of sight to do something dodgy to your sister?! You swine!"

"Like hell!"

"Besides..." Shuuhei said with a sigh, his face growing serious, "Kyouhei, you're always going on about how Pamil 'doesn't have common sense,' and telling her to behave like your little sister."

"Y-Yeah, what about it?"

"Can you honestly say you're a good enough 'Onii-chan,' nagging her about being your sister? You've never agonized over her being about to get into the bath, or gone moe moe while she slept?"

"Urk."

Ignoring the 'moe moe' and the like... it was true he'd been excited.

"Ngmm... What's all the noise, Kyouhei?" Pamil had stirred, and her voice was still sluggish with sleep.

She then scrubbed at her eyes like a hamster or bunny. The adorable action pulled her pajamas down to show her collar bones, and the second button of her shirt seemed to be on the verge of unfastening. And, well, how to put it? Her chest... it was on show. Or perhaps not quite... (control yourself).

Kyouhei had suddenly fallen silent.

Moments later, the loud laughter from his father drew his attention. "Your heart just went 'ba-dump☆,' didn't it?!"

"It... It didn't..."

"Nope, it definitely did! My moe-gauge is off the scale! Oh, Kyouhei, you horn dog! Excited over your sister!"

"Argh! Shut your face!"

It was pretty much like a middle-schooler singing about them kissing under a tree, but an adult doing it made it all the more annoying.

Kyouhei punched at the tower of boxes standing next to him with a thump.

“Then I’ll show you just how brotherly I can be!”



“And that’s what happened,” Kyouhei proclaimed. His gaze looked like a soldier heading to war. “I want to become more ‘brotherly.’”

His conversation partner, the proprietress of the Corvette sitting across the counter, let out a non-committal hum.

She was a beautiful woman with long hair tied up by a white ribbon. Her calm demeanor and herbivore-like eyes put anyone that saw her at ease.

“Brotherly... you say...?” Kaoruko’s eyebrows drew together in concern.

It was early in the morning on a holiday, so Kyouhei was the only customer in the café. Incidentally, Pamil was currently housesitting.

“I’ve always been an only child... I’ve never even seen siblings talking; I’ve got nothing for reference.”

“I think you can just carry on as you were...” Kaoruko said doubtfully.

“I can’t do that!” Kyouhei declared, far more strongly than needed. “As much as it pains me to play into his hands, things have been strange lately. If I want the sibling thing to hold water, I need to act like any other brother so people don’t have any misgivings about it.”

“Well, if you’ve made your mind up, then I can’t really say anything,” she conceded, placing a glass of iced tea in front of him. “But brothers... I don’t have any, you know?”

Kyouhei gave a sigh.

That was actually all he knew about Kaoruko’s family structure. He hadn’t come to her for advice because he thought she had a brother, but because there was no one else he could think of who would both be able to help and knew the circumstances.

“Well,” she continued, “the general image of an older brother is a guy that’s kind and dotes on his little sister.”

“Kind...” Kyouhei mused, pulling a notebook from his pocket. “Could you be

more specific?”

“Hmmm... Well, back at school... my friend was really proud of the lunchbox her brother made for her.”

“Hm, a lunchbox,” Kyouhei said with a grimace as he scribbled it down.

He already made Pamil’s lunches anyway, just while he was making his own, so the suggestion made no difference.

“That lunchbox was sooo cute; you wouldn’t think a guy had made it.”

“A cute lunchbox...” Kyouhei nodded. “Makes sense.”

He frowned as he drank his iced tea.

“Anyway, I think the most important thing is little bits of kindness,” Kaoruko remarked.

“Right, I think I’ve got an idea,” Kyouhei said, engrossed in his notebook.

“You do?”

Well... had there been an unbiased observer, they’d have made the point that normal brothers don’t make lunches for their little sisters. The exact number of older brothers in Japan who made lunch for their sisters was a mystery, but asking most people if that was the norm would result in a negative.

However, Kyouhei was desperate to act like a normal sibling, so he didn’t see anything particularly odd about Kaoruko’s suggestion.

“A cute lunchbox... A cute one... Cute...” murmured Kyouhei as he stood, still taking notes.

“Oh, you’re already heading off? You only just got here, though,” Kaoruko protested with upturned eyes.

Her childish act was oddly effective with her calm and slow nature. Kyouhei almost sat back down, but stopped at the last moment, saying: “She’ll probably get into some mess if I leave her alone too long. Sorry, I’m in a rush.”

He really couldn’t calm down if he wasn’t close enough to rush in and start making excuses for her and her lack of common sense, should something happen.

He gave Kaoruko his thanks for the advice, paid for his drink, and then left the Corvette.

“...I think that was plenty brotherly,” Kaoruko murmured to herself as she watched him leave.

• • •

Pamil had stopped.

She'd completely and utterly frozen, like a PC that had hung. Her big blue eyes were wide in surprise, and she was motionless.

In front of her...

“Your lunchbox today is really cute,” said her classmate, Youko Minebe.

As you might surmise from the previous narration, Youko was indeed talking about a lunchbox in front of Pamil.

The box itself was a girly pink. That was the same as always, though, what had frozen Pamil and earned Youko's judgment as cute was its contents.

“...Pamil-chan... you've got a handmade lunchbox from Nanbu-senpai...” muttered Sanae. She was also sitting next to Pamil, and had a finger between her lips in rapturous delight at such a sight.

Sanae had her usual set of something from the school shop and some milk. She was hunched over, eating her 80 yen jam sandwich. That, coupled with her plain—or frankly rather gloomy spectacled appearance—made her seem rather miserable. Despite them sitting around the same table to eat their lunches, Sanae and Pamil were polar opposites.

Still, the target of Sanae's jealousy was probably the “from Nanbu-senpai” part, though.

Youko also had a lunchbox, but hers was made by her mother.

“Whoa, it's so detailed. And there're little squids! Squids!” Youko exclaimed.

“Look, and some crabs. Ah, the apples are bunnies too!” Sanae said excitedly.

Eventually, though, Sanae noticed Pamil's odd reaction. Well, she was always odd in one way or another.

“Pamil-chan...?” she asked.

Of all the things that could have happened, Pamil started to shake.

“Wh-What’s wrong, Pamil-chan...?”

“It’s terrifying...” Pamil managed.

“T-Terrifying?”

That seemed to be far from how such a cute lunchbox should be described. Though if it had been given to a male highschooler, then it would have been more humiliating than anything.

“What... What on earth has happened to Kyouhei...?”

“Senpai? Something’s happened to Nanbu-senpai?!”

Sanae couldn’t contain herself when the conversation shifted to Kyouhei. Let’s ignore her utterly silent stalking—or heavy observation, rather—of him.

“I don’t know, but...” Pamil was at her wit’s end, “he’s been strange lately.” Kyouhei would have yelled about not wanting to hear that from her, but let’s ignore that. “Actually, this morning...” Pamil began.

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Pamil had just changed into her uniform and blinked at the sight of Kyouhei in the kitchen.

“Hmm...?”

It wasn’t so rare to see Kyouhei in the kitchen. In fact, he was the one that prepared all of their meals. Though there were many things he’d skimp on in the mornings, he’d usually at least fry some eggs or warm up some soup.

But that day...

The cause of Pamil’s surprise was that, before they headed out—or in other words, during what should be the busiest time of his day—Kyouhei was making an elaborate lunch.

He hadn’t used any leftovers from the day before, nor just simply heated up something from the fridge.

Fried chicken, omelet rice, salad, and many other things. Each of them had been painstakingly put together, creating a literally handmade lunch; the various cooking utensils arranged around Kyouhei made that completely clear. A stainless steel vat he'd probably used for frying and a salad spinner were among them.

"What's going—"

"Hm?" Kyouhei turned around.

When she saw his face, Pamil's question died on her lips, and she froze with her eyes wide.

He was bright, cheerful.

An unidentifiable something, a change in his expression, transformed the whole atmosphere around him. He seemed to be sparkling.

"Morning, Pamil, did you have a pleasant night?" Kyouhei asked softly.

In a shoujo manga, there'd probably be flowers in the background.



Pamil took a noisy step backward.

It was weird, wrong; something had gone wrong. She didn't know what, but it was wrong.

"...What's wrong, Kyouhei?" Pamil asked carefully—in her own way—to avoid making things worse.

Kyouhei replied with an unnecessarily bright and cheerful grin. "Wrong? Hahaha, nothing at all, Pamil. I'm getting breakfast ready, so you should go wash up."

That phrase had caused an intense feeling of unease in Pamil, but Kyouhei himself didn't seem to have noticed.

And then...

"The hell? Something smells real good?" said Shuuhei, coming into view while biting down on a yawn, his hair askew. Then, he saw the arrayed lunchbox: "Wow, that must have taken a fair bit of effort." He then casually reached out. "They look pretty tasty, let's have a bit..."

Rudely, he went for one of the wieners. That was where Kyouhei's yell came in.

...Or where it *would have*, normally.

"You can't do that, Dad," Kyouhei scolded him lightly "Children learn from their parents. Be a better example for your children, don't just snatch food."

Silence fell.

With a horrified expression, Shuuhei looked between Kyouhei and where Pamil was still frozen.

"...Ah... I see. The time has come..." Shuuhei seemed to have understood, but Pamil was still lost.

"Hmm? Kyouhei, do you have some sort of fever, or an error...?" she asked hesitantly, a confused expression on her face. She approached him timidly, reaching a hand out to his forehead to check his temperature.

"Haha, Pamil, I'm completely normal. Look, your tie's crooked," he said as he

fixed her tie. His tone made it sound like it should have a music note or heart at the end. “There we go, done. And you’ve got to call me ‘Onii-chan,’ right?” He smiled widely. A ray of light from the window shone off his teeth.

Like he was sparkling.

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“And that’s... what happened,” Pamil finished, speaking like Ju*** Inagawa telling a ghost story. “He’s been acting clearly different than normal. It’s like it’s someone else wearing his face. Seeing the lunch reminded me of it.”

“...Maybe it’s just Nanbu-senpai being more conscious of being your brother?” suggested Youko.

“Conscious of it? Hmm, I don’t really know what constitutes a standard brother in Japan, but if that’s it, why so suddenly?”

“Yeah... I wonder why,” Youko said.

“...Shuuhei said something about a ‘time,’” Pamil added.

“Hrmm...”

The two of them then noticed that something was wrong with Sanae.

“Hmm? What’s wrong?” Pamil asked.

“...Looks like her time has come too,” said Youko tiredly.

Sanae’s eyes were nearly blank as she muttered things like “Senpai... Senpai fixed her tie... He said ‘Your tie’s crooked♪’ and... Ahhhhh.”

“Sanae, don’t you start going weird too,” Youko grumbled sharply.

“...Huh?!” The chill in Youko’s voice had brought Sanae back to Earth. “I was nearly in the Astral Realm...”

“And where in Ikebukuro is that?” Youko demanded.

“More importantly, Pamil,” Sanae continued, ignoring Youko’s quip, “you said that Senpai was like another person... Could it be...!” Sanae pulled the strawman out from somewhere and started clinging to it. Who knew whether it was for curses or blessings, but let’s ignore that. “Senpai got ensorcelled...?!” she suggested.

“Hm? Sauce? He didn’t seem to have any sauce on him.”

“That’s not what I mean!” Sanae then began to explain, deaf to Youko’s attempts to stop her. “It’s like fox possession or dog possession... It’s where an evil spirit takes over your body and completely changes your personality...!”

“I... I see...!” A horrified expression on her face, Pamil was caught up in Sanae’s claims rather easily. “That would certainly make sense!”

“Make sense? You pair...” Youko groaned, but neither of the other two seemed to hear her.

“This is awful! How do we expel the spirit in Kyouhei’s body, Sanae?!”

“There are lots of ways... It’s alright, leave it to me, I’ll find out which way is best with a séance!”

“Right, I shall,” Pamil nodded at Sanae as she clenched her fist.

Things had gone far too off the rails, in several ways. Where would you even begin?

Even Youko, used to such things, had given up any form of protest and just let out a sigh, stealing a squid-shaped wiener from Pamil’s lunch. “...Poor Nanbu-senpai...”

Yes indeed.

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“Agghhhh...” Kyouhei let out a heavy sigh.

He was... tired.

He’d gotten up early to make that elaborate lunchbox, and acted as brotherly as he could. His research had meant that he’d been able to play the ideal brother (from his perspective), but it was oddly exhausting.

So, when he heard the chime signaling they were done with cleaning the classroom, he slumped.

“Kyouhei, the rep said to go throw the trash out.”

He turned to see who was addressing him.

Mizuhito was standing there with a blue trash bag in his hand.

He had an electric guitar on his back and artificial red hair and green eyes. He was overbearing; his appearance screamed out for attention just from standing there.

“You look knackered, somethin’ happen?” Mizuhito asked.

“Nah, nothing really...” Kyouhei answered vaguely, taking the trash. Then, he suddenly remembered something and looked at his friend. “Mizuhito, you’ve got a big family, yeah? What’s it like having a big brother?”

“Huh? Ah, well, you know,” Mizuhito said haughtily, “I guess I’ll explain, even if you’re bein’ really vague about stuff.”

“Oh?”

“Honestly, I get that a lot.”

“Ah, didn’t know that.”

“The birth rate’s dropping, so there’s a fair few people that want to know ‘what’s having siblings like?’”

“...Makes sense.”

Well, looking at the students in his class, the ratio did skew towards only children.

“But it’s not really something that I saw happen; I already had them when I was old enough to notice things like that,” Mizuhito told him. That was fairly logical as far as Kyouhei was concerned. “Like, I don’t know what it’s like being an only child, but if I asked you, what would you tell me?”

“...I get you,” Kyouhei said with a shrug.

In other words, the relationship between siblings was just natural to the people involved, they weren’t concerned with ‘brotherliness’ or ‘sisterliness.’

He had a long road ahead of him.

When he thought of carrying on like today until he could act without being focused on the ‘brother’ part of things, he honestly didn’t know if he’d have the strength to keep on.

“It’s like... I’m just changing my personality with a corrective cast...” he muttered.

“Huh, you say something, Kyouhei?”

“Nothing, I’ll go throw this away,” he said, lifting the trash bag as he tottered from the classroom.

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“Kyouhei—I mean, Onii-chan!” came a determined voice that you could even call heroic.

A confused expression on his face, Kyouhei turned back to look. “Pamil...?”

He was in the garbage site behind the school. It went without saying, but there weren’t often many people in the area. Kyouhei was in front of the huge pile of the school’s rubbish, next to a huge incinerator.

And so were Pamil and Sanae.

That wasn’t too odd; they went to the same school, so it wasn’t unusual to see them around the campus.

However...

“Wha...”

The thing that put Kyouhei at a loss for words was their clothing. They weren’t wearing their normal school uniform, they were wearing Japanese clothing which was painful to see, in more ways than one. They were usually called *shiroshouzoku*. On top of that, they also wore white headbands, with two candles apiece, sticking up like horns.

They were dressed like they were ready to go into a shrine at night and start hammering nails into a strawman... At the very least, those clothes weren’t suitable for cleaning in.

“Onii-chan,” Pamil spoke as she smoothly stepped in front of him, “no, whoever’s inside Onii-chan. Ready yourself.”

Then, gradually, like a predator stalking its prey, she approached him, with Sanae as well.

“Wha...?!”

Someone inside of me?! And what the hell are you doing?!

But Kyouhei resisted his yell, somehow, with great effort.

Calm down...! Like a big brother, just like that, tell off your little sister for running around like that...! Kyouhei demanded of himself, even as he could feel his cheek twitching.

He could feel his whole body somehow creaking, but constructed a ‘suitable line’ in his mind and put it into words: “Hahaha, what could you be doing, Pamil? We’re in school... you should be wearing your uniform, not that strange outfit.”

Calmly, kindly. Those words repeated themselves like an incantation in Kyouhei’s mind.

Then, Pamil seemed to falter with a whimper.

Oh, it’s working?! he thought in joy.

Suddenly, a huge cloud of something flew at him from the side.

He wondered if there’d been a sudden gust of wind that had picked up the dust from the running track or something, but there had not been. A tiny amount of it had entered his mouth and filled it with a salty taste.

“Ugh, bleh... What?”

His eyes were stinging. He took his glasses off and rubbed at his eyes, looking to where it had come from. Sanae was there, holding a pot with “salt” written on it.

“...I-I... I’ll do my best... for Senpai... and for Pamil-chan!” she cried. Was dressing up and throwing salt at people what she was trying her best at?

“M-Murata-san, whatever is the problem? I have absolutely no idea what I’ve done, won’t you explain?” Kyouhei asked, his smile faltering.

Sanae twisted herself, letting out a moan. “N-No, Sanae, don’t fall to temptation...!” she muttered to herself ambiguously.

“Silence, evil spirit!” Pamil spoke over her.

“Huh? Evil spirit?”

“I do not know why you have possessed Kyouhei, but as Princess Pamil Terrill Karl Bergmann, of the Bergmann Kingdom...’s body double android, I shall not be deceived!” Pamil cried like she was on a *tokusatsu* show. It was like she was about to use an Inner-S**I Illumination Beam or something next.

“We shall now hold the exorcism!!” “We shall!” shouted Pamil and Sanae loudly.

“...Huh? Ah, wai—”

“Making a cute lunch in the early morning, kindly fixing my tie, sitting there with a loving smile... all of these are the actions of an evil spirit—true proof you have been possessed!”

Yeah, ’cause obviously any demon, or Kyouhei in this case, would boast about that.

Pamil then pulled a bundle on the end of Sakaki wood that she’d gotten from who knows where and shook it back and forth. “Evil spirit, begone! Evil spirit, begone!” she yelled.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry... but this is for Senpai...!” Sanae cried as she flung salt towards him.



“Douman! Seiman!” both of them started to call.

The two of them were dancing around and yelling something; he couldn’t tell whether it was an incantation or song. It was as if they were *onmyouji*, or exorcists, from somewhere.

It was a bizarre, or perhaps even hellish, scene. Kyouhei’s beloved peace and normalcy were now about as far as the Pleiades were from Earth.

H-Hang in there, Kyouhei told himself, be an elder brother, unmoved by all! You can’t scold your little sister over every little thing!

Kyouhei seemed to be rather mistaken in a few ways, but well, there wasn’t anyone to call him on his thoughts.

“Calm down, you two. I don’t know what’s gotten into both of you, but I’m not possessed at all. I mean, look at how normal I am!” Kyouhei proclaimed with a cheerful smile, spreading his arms wide.

Rather than rejoice, though, Pamil and Sanae both grew fearful, huddling up and whispering to each other.

“Ngh, Sanae, it’s not working at all. What do we do?” Pamil asked.

“O-Oh no... it’s a really strong spirit...”

After some more discussion, Pamil stepped forward. “It’s come to this... It might be dangerous, but—”

She thrust forth her pale hands, and Kyouhei began to panic. “Wa... Wait, Pam—”

“Let’s go! Royal Fir—I mean, Exorcism Fiiiiirrrrrreeee!!”

Kyouhei screamed, flinging himself away immediately.

A vortex of fire issued forth from her pale hands and engulfed the spot where Kyouhei had just been standing, blasting heat out. The trash he’d left behind instantly started to warp and melt from the heat, and the mountain of trash behind it began to burn as well.

Kyouhei watched it, dumbfounded.

With this absurd sight before him...

Hang in there, you're her brother, right?! Gently... Gently tell her to stop...

"Like hell I can do thaaaaat!!"

His patience had its limits.

Kyouhei rejected his inner monologue with a yell, turning to Pamil. He wasn't open-minded enough to be calm and gentle after that heat.

"Are you trying to burn me alive?! You burnt the school's stuff as well; what are you thinking?!" Kyouhei ranted, having completely given up on playing brother amongst the acrid stench of burning plastic.

"What do you mean? Exorcism Fire is non-lethal! It's a holy fire that only burns evil!"

"The trash is burning!"

"Indeed, it must be evil trash."

"Like hell it is! What even decides if it's holy or evil?!"

"That is, of course, my per..." Pamil began one of her usual lines, but then stopped. "Onii-chan... you're back to sanity?"

"I was sane to begin with! Why'd you think I was possessed?"

"You were acting weird," she answered decisively.

"How?! I was just being a wonderful brother!"

"Hmm, you were?!"

"Um, Senpai," Sanae interjected timidly, "because you changed so suddenly, Pamil-chan was worried... T-Then... I suggested an exorcism... I'm sorry..."

An unhappy expression made its way across his face; he more or less got what had gone on. "You prefer me when I'm shouting and scolding you?"

Kyouhei wasn't happy; it felt like his efforts to be brotherly had been spat on, and his irritation made its way into his voice.

But...

"Whether I prefer it or not, that's you," Pamil said blankly, looking up at him. "I know that, but you were acting differently, and it made me uneasy."

...Ah, I see...

For better or worse, their relationship wasn't normal, that was an inescapable truth. Therefore, gathering people's knowledge and opinions to act as the 'ideal brother' made him seem unnatural and artificial... that was why Pamil had been uneasy.

He was indeed being brotherly... but Kyouhei and Pamil needed to define their own relationship, there was no easy how-to for it.

So...

He let out a sigh and ran a hand through his hair. "Ahh, I'll quit it."

"Wha...?"

"I mean, things might look weird to other people... but this is our normal, right?"

"Hmmm?"

"I shouldn't force weird labels onto things. As long as things are going well... Yeah," Kyouhei monologued as he stretched.

Pamil had tilted her head in utter confusion. Seeing her familiar, adorable bird-like action, Kyouhei smiled slightly before addressing her: "Doesn't matter, I was talking to myself. Sorry to get you wrapped up in this, Sanae-san."

"N-Not at all...! I'm completely fine!" Sanae insisted, shaking her head fast enough that it looked like it might fall off.

"...Anyway, it's all Dad's fault."

It had all gotten out of hand because of Shuuhei's pointless provocation.

Once he got home, Kyouhei would make him remove the cameras and bugs, and then give him a beating, this he vowed.

Chapter 5 - Out of Order

“Hmm?”

It was a maddeningly humid summer’s day. The discomfort index had been steadily rising in the town... and in a corner of said town, a girl had suddenly stopped with that curious noise.

The girl’s airy white dress swayed around her legs. She was a beautiful girl, almost like a fairy from folk tales, or an angel; she utterly lacked mundanity in her looks.

Her skin was like porcelain, her eyes like sapphires, and her hair like spun thread. With her standing there silently, people might even believe that she was actually a doll; some craftsman’s masterwork.

“What’s wrong, Pamil?” asked Kyouhei Nanbu, standing next to the gorgeous girl.

Officially, she was his sister by the name of Harumi Nanbu, but her true identity was that of an eccentric that called themselves a body double android of some country’s princess by the name of Pamil Terrill Karl Bergmann.

“What’s that?” she murmured.

Following her gaze, Kyouhei couldn’t see what exactly she was referring to; the scenery before them was that of a completely normal town.

“What?”

“That,” she repeated, pointing with one of her pale fingers.

He once more looked in that direction, only to furrow his brow. “It’s a garbage dump,” he answered.

Indeed, an everyday garbage dump. This one was mainly filled with oversized trash, things like old appliances and furniture, but there was also a chaotic pile of smaller objects.

It wasn’t exactly a rare sight.

However...

“That’s awful,” came the voice from his side, followed by a curtain of gold hair passing next to him. Pamil had run off for some reason.

“Hey, Pamil?!” Kyouhei called after her in surprise, but she heedlessly charged towards the mound of trash.

This wasn’t the first time she’d acted strangely, but she rarely ran off alone like that. After a moment of staring gobsmacked at her running figure, Kyouhei let out a sigh and followed after her.

“It’s awful, Kyouhei,” Pamil condemned again next to the pile. “Someone’s abandoned a dog here.”

“What...?” he asked, looking over her shoulder. What he saw had the tension leave his shoulders all at once. “...Pamil, that’s not a dog,” he told her.

He—or rather, it—was in a gap in the pile of trash. It was a dull silver, almost as if it was complaining about being stuffed in there, or claiming it wasn’t trash. On closer inspection, though, it was evident that it was neither silver nor steel; it was just painted to look that way.

Its body was plastic painted silver; the multiple locations where the paint had worn away made that clear. It was about the size of a box of tissues, and was in fact attached by its limbs into a box of that size.

Broadly speaking, you could call it a dog, but more specifically, it should also have the word ‘fake’ attached to it. While it was indeed a dog, it was an artificial one.

“It’s a robot; they were pretty popular a while back,” clarified Kyouhei.

It was something an electronics company had brought to the market. It used the latest robotic technology, so it was exceedingly expensive—half a month’s wages for a new office worker—but the robot had essentially no practical use; it was just something to cherish.

It became explosively popular a few years ago, but people got tired of it surprisingly quickly. It was a rather unavoidable result really.

Pet-shaped robots like that were made to be a substitute for an actual pet.

Their sales points were the fact that they didn't create a mess like real pets, didn't get ill, and you could always reset them. They weren't real pets, so when people got tired of them, they either sold them or threw them away guilt-free.

"I guess they threw it away when the boom passed," Kyouhei remarked.

It was motionless, which clearly showed its inorganic nature. Maybe it had no charge, or was just broken.

Well, Kyouhei was rather relieved; it was far better than finding a real abandoned dog, either alive or dead.

However, Pamil reached out to the fake dog.

"Hmm... How sad."

"Hey, what are you doing, Pamil?" he asked, but even as he did so, he could see what she was thinking. "Just so you know, you can't take it home. Even if it was thrown away, taking it is still illegal."

He was sure that such an action would be called something like "Fraudulent appropriation of privately owned goods." Well, it wasn't strictly enforced, and there probably wouldn't be a punishment, but...

"You mean we should leave this poor dog here?" Pamil asked, turning around to look up at Kyouhei.

Kyouhei panicked slightly at the rare hint of criticism in her gaze and voice. "I mean, it's not a dog. Well, it is, but it's an artificial—"

"Artificial or not, a dog is a dog," Pamil spoke bluntly over Kyouhei's justification. "It's not a good sign for you as a person that you changed your attitude so quickly when you found out it was a robot."

"...I mean... you know..." Kyouhei wasn't quite happy about being lectured on humanity by a (self-proclaimed) android.

"Am I not a person as far as you're concerned then? In your book, if something isn't natural, is it removed from morality and ethics?"

Pamil applied the same sense of values—those of morality and ethics—to both mechanical and biological entities. Well, it was a natural attitude for a girl that proclaimed herself an android.

But still...

“I’m sure he’s just collapsed from starvation!” she cried.

Kyouhei let out a sigh. Food for robots would be electricity, and if that ran out, then it wouldn’t be able to move. Using that interpretation, Pamil’s diagnosis wasn’t completely wrong.

She held the robot dog close to her chest, blatantly obstinate; she wouldn’t listen to anything he said.

Is it ‘cause it’s a robot that she feels close to it?

Currently, he still didn’t know whether she was an actual android or a loopy girl with said delusions listening to sixth-dimensional signals.

It was true, though, that she had never once swayed from her origin as “an android made to act as the body double of the Bergmann Kingdom’s princess.” Seemingly, that formed the core of her belief system. Plus, Kyouhei knew that regardless of how absurd or ridiculous it sounded, he couldn’t just flatly deny her.

So...

“Ah, forget it, fine,” he grumbled. “Let’s take it for an examination, so we can see if it can move or not.”

If the robot dog was completely broken, then even Pamil would have to admit that it was ‘dead’ and give up on it.

That was Kyouhei’s plan, at least.

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“Oh, this takes me back,” said Kaoruko when she first saw the robot dog on her counter. “It’s a Fred.”

Her full name was Kaoruko Houwa, the manager of the Corvette café. She looked to be in her mid-twenties, but Kyouhei didn’t know her exact age.

It was always the case, but there was a worrying lack of customers in the café. Kyouhei, however, thought that the all-wood furnishings and design of the place made time itself feel slower, so he liked it quite a bit. Coupled with the

owner's calm demeanor, it made for a relaxing and healing space. Although, thanks to that lack of customers, he could just turn up like this for some odd discussions.

"Fred? So that's his name?" Pamil asked, stroking the robot dog's back. Her jacket was spread out beneath it.

"It's a pet robot with basic AI and learning algorithms. It was popular with tech enthusiasts, and so they made it a full product line. This is an ERS-12, the oldest model," Kaoruko explained calmly.

"Oh yeah, there were different types as well," Kyouhei added.

"There really were. There were round ones that looked like plushies, and even ones that transformed into fighter jets. They were really popular for a while, so they sold like hotcakes considering the price."

"It was cheaper to get a real dog," Kyouhei remarked.

You could get a real, live puppy from a pet shop for a few thousand yen. It would be much cuter too, so Kyouhei didn't really understand why people would spend several times more money on a fake.

That being said...

"There were people that bought them because they like robots, rather than real dogs," Kaoruko added, resting her cheek on her hand.

"Because they were robots?"

"It was like having cutting-edge tech in your house. There's a certain appeal at least. They're even selling those robot kits for bipeds now... At the time, it was close to making things you'd only see in manga and anime, though."

"Right..."

"And there are apartments that don't let you have pets. They also wanted to give people allergic to dogs the same 'soothing.'"

"...I see, there are people who want a pet but can't actually have one," Kyouhei said with a nod.

"Where'd this one come from, though?" Kaoruko asked.

“It had been thrown away at the dumpsite,” he told her with a reluctant smile. “Pamil was oddly interested in it. I couldn’t tell if it was broken, though, and there aren’t any instructions, so we came to talk to you. I couldn’t think of anyone else good with machines...”

“Hmmm...?” Kaoruko let out as she surveyed the Fred. “This kind of robot often has a lot of black-boxed components, so you can’t just open it up.”

“Really?”

“They probably exchanged the whole thing when they were serviced... They stopped production a few years ago now, though, so I don’t know if we’d even be able to find the parts.” Well, that was often the case for the latest technology. “There’s nothing that looks particularly bad on the surface, so we’ll need to charge it before we can see if anything’s wrong with it,” she added.

She flipped the Fred’s chassis over and checked the serial number on its stomach. “The charger was proprietary, so I doubt we can just plug it straight into the mains,” Kaoruko pointed out.

“Damn, maybe they threw out the charger with it,” Kyouhei said.

Then...

“He needs charging? Leave it to me,” Pamil nodded, immediately reaching for it.

Electricity, Pamil, hand. Those three words passed through Kyouhei’s mind, instantly giving him a bad feeling.

“Wait a mi—”

“Royal Thunder!” A pale surge of lightning from her hand accompanied the familiar cry.

A normal person might freeze in shock or back away at the bizarre sight, but Kyouhei was long-familiar with this, and almost reflexively smacked her around the back of the head.

“Are you a moron?!” he demanded.

“Hm?” she frowned at the hit. “Is there a problem, Kyouhei?”

“Damn right there is! You’re lucky there aren’t any other customers!
...Anyway, using high voltage like a lightning bolt will break it even if it works!”

“Don’t worry, I made sure to reduce its power so Fred’s circuits wouldn’t burn out,” she declared proudly. And then... “Look!”

At the end of Pamil’s pointing finger, Fred seemed to be vibrating. Although it did look like it was going through death throes...

With a whine and creaks from the motors, Fred began to move, the noises driving home its robotic nature. Fred’s body clumsily shook back and forth as it stretched out its legs and stood up.

“Oh! He’s alive!” Pamil cried out in happiness.



However...

With yet more grinding and creaking, Fred tilted its head.

“It’s...”

There were generally two reasons things that were out of production were discarded: because they were broken, or because of lost interest.

This Fred likely fell into the former camp. It wasn’t completely broken, but it had passed its service life and several small defects had appeared; the unpleasant noise and needless stiffness to its movements were proof of that.

There would be no point in keeping something that was supposed to give the same soothing as owning a dog when it moved so blatantly mechanically.

Even so...

“Hurray!” Pamil shouted in joy.

Fred’s LED eyes blinked at Pamil, and its tail—with accompanying squealing, of course—waved left and right.

To Kyouhei, those unnatural movements seemed forced all together. He didn’t know whether they were due to defects or how it had originally been made.

“It’s good that it moves, but what are we doing with it, Kyouhei-kun?” Kaoruko asked.

“You ask me that, but...” Kyouhei frowned.

As previously mentioned, Kyouhei had brought Pamil here to have her give up on it. He’d thought she’d give up if she knew if it was broken or ‘dead.’

Contrary to his expectations, though, the robot dog had started to move. And on top of that, Pamil was overjoyed at the result; she seemed to like Fred.

“It’s not like I can tell her to throw it away now...” Kyouhei muttered, prompting Pamil’s ears to prick up.

Her expression burst into happiness. “I can keep him? Really?!” she asked, looking at him with eyes sparkling hopefully.

Normally, she wasn't very expressive, so her expression now, happy from the bottom of her heart, was all the more blatant; it was adorable and hard to go against.

Kyouhei, for his part, could only give a strained smile and laugh. Though, of course, he didn't forget to add "...You'll need to look after it yourself."

Regardless, unlike a real animal, it wouldn't make a mess or get ill, so there wouldn't be much to look after.

"I will!" she nodded quickly and deeply, happier than Kyouhei had ever seen her before.

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It was a hot summer's day, the kind that on a low-humidity day would be called blazing, and sweltering on a high-humidity one. And... on those sweltering days, there were frequently large rainstorms during the evening. These were generally called evening showers. Because of how suddenly the heavens would open, many people panicked, not having an umbrella with them.

"Uhyaaaau!" The girl screaming as she ran under the shelter in front of her door was one of them.

She had an old-fashioned bobbed haircut and round glasses that could have been drawn by a compass. On close inspection, she was fairly cute, but her beauty was counteracted in a few ways by her subdued gloominess, which made it seem like she'd call gravesites her favorite places.

This was Sanae Murata. The downpour had soaked her through.

"Aw... I'm sodden..." she mumbled, water dripping from her hair.

"In a weird way, you being dripping wet actually kinda suits you," said her friend, Youko Minebe, with a wry smile. She was also sopping wet after being caught in the shower. "You know, put your hair like this and let your hands droop." As she spoke, she posed like one of the traditional willow spirits.

"Youko-chan..." Sanae muttered with her eyes downcast, "you know I'm not giving you anything other than tea cakes, even if you do flatter me, right...?"

“I wasn’t, not at all,” Youko said as she waved her hand. “...Anyway, I really don’t get you sometimes.”

“Y-You don’t?”

“Like, I don’t get what you like about Nanbu-senpai at all.”

“Eh? But he’s so wonderful,” she protested, pulling a bunch of keys out and opening the door.

Even though it was the summer holiday, they had met so they could finish their homework together.

“I think our definitions of the word ‘wonderful’ are a bit different.”

“I... I think that might be a good thing, though... If you fell for Nanbu-senpai... I don’t know what I’d do.”

“I’m not, not at all,” she denied with a strained smile. Then, she looked at Sanae out of the corner of her eye before continuing, her tone meaningful: “Though I think Pamil-chan might be a bit of an issue?”

She was probably trying to spur Sanae on considering her late awakening to romance for a teen nowadays.

But...

“Hmm... I don’t think so...” Sanae shook her head as they stepped inside. “Senpai... doesn’t look... at Pamil-chan... like that... I think...”

“How come you think that?” Youko asked, stepping inside with a quick “Scuse me.” Though, at that time of day, both of Sanae’s parents were still at work, so there was no one to answer. They’d picked Sanae’s place because it would be easier to do their homework with no one around.

“...Umm... I don’t really have a reason... I just... kinda do...”

“Even though they’re not blood-related?”

“They’re... not, but...”

Sanae’s fantasies would usually head off into R-18 territory at the slightest provocation, but... when she thought more calmly about things, the ones involving Kyouhei and Pamil weren’t particularly realistic. And if something

could possibly have happened, it already would have.

...I kinda think... Senpai has a line in the sand with Pamil...

Sanae's usual stal—I mean, heavy observation, had let her draw that conclusion.

Anyway, their relationship was more that of a lodger and guardian rather than one between the sexes, so she didn't feel like Kyouhei saw Pamil as a target for romance. And that wasn't because they were legally siblings.

...Maybe... she thought, it's got something to do with Pamil-chan calling herself an android.

Whether or not she was an android, the claim might have solidified their relationship into a strange one.

However...

What if the reason for that solidification went away?

"What's up?" Youko asked curiously.

"Ahh, sorry, it's nothing. Nothing at all...?" She covered up the vague unease building within her heart and forced a smile.

● ● ●

Kyouhei heard his phone go off as he stood in the kitchen getting ready for dinner.

Mizuhito had changed his ringtone to *Pixel☆Maritan's* opening theme, and it was too much of a bother to change it back, so he'd just left it be. It was a little risky, but if you didn't know what the lyrics meant, it was just a marching song with a good rhythm.

Ignoring that, though.

"Hmm..."

Kyouhei checked the clock on the wall as he shut off the tap, seeing it was already past 6:00 p.m.

Currently, he was in the Nanbu household, commonly called a warehouse. Well, it really was just a warehouse that happened to have houseware inside.

As ever, the kitchen was only one in name; it was an area in a corner of the mass of Shuuhei's goods. Kyouhei's phone was on a table in the area.

Drying his hands on a towel, he reached out for his phone.

"...Ah."

But the instant he touched it, the phone stopped ringing, like it was waiting for that exact moment.

Fiddling with the buttons, he saw that the caller was Sanae Murata.

"...Murata-san, huh?"

Once more fiddling with the buttons, he opened up his voicemail. He put the phone to his ear and the usual words issued forth. "You have reached your voicemail. You have one unread message..." and so on.

"What's happening, Kyouhei, you're on the phone?" Pamil asked as she approached.

That much was normal, but there was something following her.

Fred.

The recharged puppy was following along after her with mechanical whines and creaks. It might have been mechanical, but when it came around Pamil and sat at Kyouhei's feet, looking up at him, he could still call it charming. Well, its LED eyes were behind a visor thing, so he couldn't exactly tell, but it was still kinda cute.

But then...

"Time, six, thirty, nine—"

"Hyah?!" Kyouhei cried out reflexively as the dog started shaking its head back and forth and speaking.

"Replaying, first, message."

"It's talking! Wait..." Kyouhei panicked for a second. It turned out that was just the voice from the voicemail. "What the..."

"Well, the USB Bluetooth system looked like it would work so I connected it."

“Don’t just set that stuff up!” Kyouhei yelled.

Incidentally, Bluetooth was a protocol that enabled phones to connect to headsets, or PCs to other peripherals, wirelessly.

Regardless, after a shrill beep, a voice came out of Fred. “Um... Senpai... it’s me... Murata...” Even over the phone, she was as halting as ever, and coupled with the mechanical nature of Fred, it made the whole thing rather surreal. “Umm... it’s nothing big... but... um... I wonder if we could meet up for a while... um... I wondered whether you’re doing okay... that’s all... I’m sorry to call you for something so weird!”

The message cut off there.

“End, of message. If you wish, to replay, or to save, then—” Fred continued with the voicemail’s voice.

“Indeed, it works well,” Pamil nodded proudly.

“...Where’d you even get the Bluetooth from?” Kyouhei asked, glaring at her.

“It was in Shuuhei’s things. Fred doesn’t have a USB cover, so I was looking for something I could use as a ‘lid’ for it,” she explained. Now that he looked closely, he saw a crest-like thing on Fred’s head, like a captain unit. That would be the Bluetooth adapter. “And since he’s got Bluetooth, I decided to connect it to your phone. Looks like it works fine. It’s really useful and practical. Good boy, Fred, I’m proud!”

“Don’t go messing with people’s phones,” he scolded her.

What did Mizuhito and Pamil think his phone was? It was a real invasion of privacy too. Well, Pamil had no phone of her own, so if she wanted to test things out, it would have to be with his.

“Anyway, get rid of it!” Kyouhei demanded.

“Hmm... And you’d just gotten more functions... Kyouhei’s a narrow-minded man,” she said to Fred. It started wagging its tail, as if in response.

“Me? I’m the one that’s wrong?”

“By the way, Kyouhei,” Pamil began in answer to his grumbles, suddenly realizing something, “was that a message from Sanae?”

“Eh? Well, yeah,” he admitted, though he didn’t think the message really needed a reply.

“If you’re going to phone her, can I speak to her as well?”

“You want to talk to her about something in particular?”

“I want to talk to her about Fred, a bit at least,” she answered.

She probably wanted to brag.

“...Fine then,” sighed Kyouhei.

He pulled up Sanae’s number and hit the dial before passing the phone to Pamil.

“Thank you!”

She pulled out a chair and sat at the table. Fred sat next to her, the dial tone coming from its speaker.

“H-Hello!” came the answer.

“Hi, Sanae, it’s me,” Pamil said.

“H-Huh...? Pamil...chan...?” The slight confusion in her voice was probably because she’d thought it was Kyouhei calling.

“Indeed, I’m currently borrowing Kyouhei’s phone,” Pamil explained.

“Ah, s-so that’s why. Well...” came the answer from Fred (Sanae). They couldn’t quite tell if she was relieved or disappointed. Fred was moving regardless of the content of the conversation, scratching at its head with a hind leg, making more creaking noises. “Huh, what’s that noise?” asked Sanae.

“Well, I got a dog today,” Pamil answered.

You forgot to tell her it’s a robot one, Kyouhei quipped mentally, but Pamil continued regardless.

“I’ve started looking after him, but I don’t know exactly what to do with a lot of things.”

“Ah... that makes sense...”

“I seem to remember you saying you have a dog, though.”

“I do,” Sanae answered.

“I need your knowledge and experience.”

“You want to know how to look after a dog?”

“Indeed.”

At some point, Pamil had switched from speaking to the phone to speaking to Fred where it sat on the floor. It did have a microphone as well as a speaker, so it would work in its place...

“Um... first you need to know about walking him. Small dogs can get away with just playing inside, but it’s better to walk them outside anyway...” Sanae started.

Pamil then hummed to herself as she started taking notes in a notebook she’d retrieved from somewhere. Meanwhile, Fred spoke fluently in Sanae’s voice as she taught Pamil about how to care for dogs.

It was as odd as you might expect, but it was also rather charming.

The whole conversation was all about how to look after a real dog, but it wouldn’t do any harm, so Kyouhei just smiled reluctantly and returned to cooking.

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And thus, dawn broke on another day.

Unlike the previous day, the sky today was thick with clouds over the city. While the temperature had dropped a little thanks to that, it was still warm and just as humid, so there wasn’t a huge difference comfort-wise.

However, regardless of all of that, a certain girl was excessively energetic.

“Let’s go, Fred!” exclaimed Pamil triumphantly as they left the house, or more accurately, the warehouse.

There was a red cord clasped in her hand. And, on the end of it, was a collar around Fred, who was at her side. It was clearly a leash for walking.

“Sanae said dogs should be walked every morning and evening. Let’s go for a walk so you stay healthy!”

There was no way it would have understood her, but Fred's tail seemed to be wagging happily behind it as it walked with its joints creaking.

"While you shouldn't be barking at nothing, it's not nice walking in silence," Pamil said to Fred, "so you can bark a bit if you want to."

Clatter clatter clatter clatter.

"We're both robots, even if we're built to different standards and look different, so you don't need to be polite."

Clatter clatter clatter clatter.

"What's wrong? Are you worried about it raining? Don't worry, I've got a plastic bag for if it rains, I'll put you in it right away."

Clatter clatter—(etc.).

Pamil looked askance at Fred. No matter what she said, all that it did was wag its tail or flash its eyes. "Hmm, you're a tight-lipped one."

Kyouhei wondered whether he should interject or just watch them leave and let them be.

I mean, even real dogs and cats wouldn't talk, and they weren't constantly making noises either.

"I know!" cried Pamil as she punched her hand. "You probably just want to get on with the walk. Oh, you're a cute little guy."

The exchange certainly wasn't a conversation, but Pamil still nodded happily and set off again. With a clatter, Fred followed slowly along with her.

"...Wait... they're seriously going on a walk...?" muttered Kyouhei in shock as he watched them leave. "Why's she that happy with it? Wait, maybe..."

He suddenly realized Kyouhei's father had retrieved Pamil from a garbage site in that coffin-shaped case. She had been disposed of because, despite being made as a body double for the princess, the royal family had vanished after the coup.

A robot that had been discarded.

Maybe she was seeing the similarity in her situation and Fred's, discarded

once its popularity had passed.

“A robot... huh?” Kyouhei muttered, turning back into the house.

To be able to live in the warehouse, they had saved a corner of the space from the mass of goods. There was a handmade dog bed composed of cloth and cardboard in the area that Pamil had created yesterday once they’d gotten home.

Pamil was a cute girl. There were a lot of oddities and general weirdness about her, but she was a fundamentally earnest and kind girl; you could tell from watching her fuss over Fred.

So... living under the same roof as a girl like that would naturally be likely to awaken a boy to love. However, Kyouhei didn’t see Pamil like that. Or rather, he told himself not to.

And that was because...

An android, huh?

Indeed. At the time, he’d simply thought of her claim as a delusional girl’s fantasy. Modern science couldn’t create a robot indistinguishable from a human. Fred and its ilk were the limit of robotics.

But on the other hand, Pamil could launch lightning and fire, or strange beams of light, something impossible for humans. Therefore, Kyouhei couldn’t quite laugh off her claims of being an android.

An android.

A mechanical humanoid simulacrum.

A humanoid false human.

Despite being human-like, none of them were human.

Even if they looked like they were happy or sad, it was nothing more than a program running on their systems. A complex system might make them seem like a human, but they weren’t fundamentally all that different from a doll that played a recording of “Mama, I’m hungry” if you pulled a string on its back.

Wouldn’t feeling love towards such a thing be like yearning for a wall or a

void...?

Those worries were always somewhere in his heart.

Kyouhei let out a short sigh and switched the TV on. The current channel was just finishing the news, and the newscaster was reading out the weather forecast.

“...Some regions will see some rain. Everyone, make sure you remember your umbrellas.”

“The rainy season should have finished ages ago, but it’s still raining a fair bit,” Kyouhei grumbled with a frown.

Then, he remembered something. *Actually... did she take an umbrella?* he thought to himself.

He’d heard her talk about using a plastic bag as a raincoat for Fred, but he wasn’t sure what she’d be doing for herself.

He looked at the umbrella stand by the entrance and saw the umbrellas were all still inside it. All three were cheap plastic umbrellas bought from a convenience store.

“That idiot,” he grumbled, rubbing his forehead. It wouldn’t necessarily rain during her walk, but... “Well, no choice then...” Kyouhei told himself, picking up two umbrellas.

● ● ●

It was easy to find Pamil and Fred. Before even five minutes had passed, Kyouhei saw the familiar blonde on the other side of a crossing.

“I knew it,” he said to himself.

Unlike a normal dog, the robot dog didn’t walk very fast, and couldn’t run either, so Kyouhei had figured they couldn’t have gotten far and looked around the neighborhood. He hadn’t thought he’d find them so soon, though.

The house was in the warehouse district. Or more accurately, it itself was one warehouse among many, but it was used as their house.

It had long been a rule that Pamil could only go out alone on Sundays, and

only around the neighborhood, to avoid showing Pamil's aberrant 'android-ness' to passersby.

While students on holiday wouldn't pay much attention to the days of the week, today was indeed a Sunday. It was a day off from the usual loading and unloading of goods in the warehouse district, so it was fairly quiet. There was the occasional truck that went past on its way to a distant destination, but that was the only work going on in the area.

Consequently, a blonde girl walking a tottering robot dog stood out among that gray scenery.

Kyouhei lifted his free hand to wave to her.

"Pami—" he started.

At the very moment he yelled, it happened.

An explosion of noise assaulted his head. It was the sound of a tire bursting.

Instinctively, Kyouhei looked towards the source of the noise and saw a long-distance truck skidding sideways along the road. It wasn't going very fast, but would have a significant amount of inertia behind it if it was fully loaded. A corner of the bumper hit the ground, scraping along with a piercing screech, sparking as it bore down on Pamil...!

"Pamil!" Kyouhei yelled.

There wasn't time to avoid it. The sparks colored the early morning mist an eerie red, and the ominous roar of the truck spread through the ground beneath them.

The truck skidded again, and then... the huge metal construction slammed straight into a wall.

All too suddenly, silence fell.

Pamil was...

"...Pamil."

The truck had plowed right into where she was standing. So where was she? Was she in some space between the truck and the wall? Or had the truck...

“Pamil!” he yelled, racing over.

She'll be okay, she'll be fine, he told himself as he ran. She'd stopped a truck with a single hand before. If she felt like it, she could have blasted the whole truck away as well. So she'd be alright, she'd be okay.

But... he thought uneasily. It had been so sudden; had she been able to react? Her dainty body wouldn't be able to stand up to the immense weight of the truck, so...

“Pamil!” he called again.

Eventually, he saw her totter out from behind the truck at his call.

His chest was suddenly filled with relief as he ran over to her with a smile.

...But that smile then froze instantly.

He'd seen Fred clutched within her arms.

No...

“Kyouhei... I... covered him immediately... but the pressure...” Pamil said haltingly, looking up at Kyouhei in a daze.

What Kyouhei had seen was what used to be Fred.

The robot dog's body had been smashed, exposing the mechanisms inside. The lights that were his eyes, the things that blinked to show he was listening, had gone out, and he had fallen silent.

Even Kyouhei could tell it was beyond saving, and he wasn't familiar with machines.

“Kyouhei... he's not moving,” she continued, her voice more questioning than sad. She probably didn't know how to take it. “Is he... dead?”

Kyouhei wanted to correct her and tell her that it was broken, but the words stopped in his throat and he swallowed them. There wasn't a clear reason as to why he did so, he just didn't feel like he could say those words.

“...Yeah, he is...”

Indeed, Fred, a robot that Pamil had taken up, was dead. Even if he got another of the same type of robot from somewhere, it wouldn't be Pamil's

beloved Fred.

Silence fell, accompanied by rain.

The rain intensified, mercilessly beating against Pamil and Kyouhei, and against Fred's motionless body. Kyouhei didn't think to open the umbrella in his hand; he just softly stroked Pamil's hair.



Ah, right...

Even robots die. You couldn't undo death. In that sense, they were no different than the real thing. Nor was the emptiness that the loss created...

"Let's bury him," Kyouhei suggested.

She didn't answer him, but he was almost sure she was crying.

● ● ●

It was several days since Fred had died.

"Pamil, come here a minute," Kyouhei called.

The girl in question was sitting on the sofa, vaguely watching the TV.

Ordinarily, she'd have immediately answered and asked what he wanted.

"Pamil?" he called.

Nothing.

"Paamiil!"

Nothing.

"Pamil-chan. Princess Pamil. Pamil-sama. Hey!"

Again, nothing; she just kept blankly watching the TV.

Her blue eyes were somewhat empty, meaninglessly looking at the TV. While they were facing the TV screen, he doubted whether she was actually seeing it.

It was like the saying: there in body, but not in spirit.

The loss of Fred had probably been a significant shock. She'd acted and spoken the same as always the day after it had happened, but it was probably just to avoid Kyouhei, Sanae, or anyone else worrying about her. Kyouhei had seen her space out and act slightly listless when she lost focus.

"...Damn it."

It was just a robot, a simple robot.

Well, even Kyouhei wasn't really convinced by that, but it was tough to watch her like this. That said, he hesitated to just buy her a new toy or a real dog,

because it would be like he was just treating Fred as a thing.

So...

“Pamil!” he yelled, hitting her on the back of the head.

She finally started paying attention, blinking at Kyouhei. “Hm, what is it, Kyouhei?”

“Come here a minute.”

“Hmm?”

He pulled her along by the hand. Kyouhei took her to his room—or more accurately, an area of the warehouse he’d taken for himself—and sat her down in front of his PC.

“What?” she asked.

“Right, this icon,” he said, using the mouse to move the cursor over an icon labeled “V.F.” and click it.

Then...

Woof!

Pamil’s eyes opened wide in shock. There was a 3D Fred sitting on the screen in front of her.

“That’s...” she started.

“His body was beyond help, but this survived fine,” he explained, pointing at a memory disk plugged into the side of his PC. “There were a lot of fans of Fred, but now that the manufacturer stopped production, you can’t get parts. In other words, you can’t do anything when they break, so people developed and published this so their beloved dogs could live on forever.” As he spoke, Kyouhei pointed to where Fred was walking around the screen.

Lots of features had been added, too. Fred’s eyes flashed as he stood still, tilting his head. Then, he sat down and started scratching his head with his back leg.

“You move the data from your own Fred to this software and, well, it’s just on the PC, but you can still keep him. The chassis—or his body—might be gone, but your Fred is right there,” he told her.

“Kyouhei...” Pamil began, eyes wide as they shot between him and Fred.

He couldn’t tell what she was thinking, but he could tell her confusion was outweighing her logic and happiness right now.

But then...

“Kyouhei!” she yelled, clinging to him.

“Wait a—”

“Kyouhei! *Danke!* Kyouhei, *ich danke Ihnen!* Ahh, thank you so much! So, so much! Sorry, that’s not enough, but I don’t know what else to say!” she gushed. Then, she suddenly separated herself from him, seemingly on the verge of hugging the monitor. “Fred! I’m so glad! Don’t you worry, I’ll get you a new body! You wait here until then!”

Woof! barked Fred, seemingly in response.

Pamil stared at the screen, talking to Fred over and over.

She was... exceedingly happy, and in the two or three hours it took Kyouhei to drag her off the PC to check his email, she didn’t get tired of conversing with Fred after his return.

“It’s wonderful, absolutely wonderful! Japan is amazing!” Pamil exclaimed. “Their traditions transcend death! So this is an Obon?!”

“No, it’s really not,” Kyouhei interjected.

But, well, he was happy that she was so joyous.

He’d have to phone and thank Kaoruko again for telling him about this Virtual Fred as well.

...Guess I’ll have to look on some auctions for a chassis too, he thought to himself.

It would be a really annoying undertaking, but for some reason... Kyouhei was in a good mood about it.

Chapter 6 - Cooking Was That Difficult?

“I’m home,” Kyouhei Nanbu said as he lifted a plastic shopping bag with a spring onion poking out of the top.

After undoing the almost military-level security, he stepped into his home. His voice echoed through the excessively large space. Though he called it home, it was by no means a house as far as most interpretations of the word went. The rooms had no locks, and in fact, they were barely separated, meaning it was fundamentally just a single room under the one roof. It might sound nice to call it a studio apartment, but the place was too open, as if it were asking: “Privacy? What’s that? Can you eat it?”

That being said, the floor was strewn with goods from Kyouhei’s father’s job: cardboard boxes, shipping containers, wooden boxes, and so on. As a result, there were plenty of things to hide behind.

And well, all of that was to be expected; it was one warehouse among many in the warehouse district. All they had done was bring household items in... Frankly, calling that a house publicly would bring tears to housebuilders everywhere.

Leaving all that aside...

“Welcome back, Kyouhei,” called a girl, sticking her head out from around one of the towers of goods. Then, she rushed towards him like a puppy when its owner came home.

Pamil Terrill Karl Bergmann, a mysterious foreigner who whole-heartedly claimed to be an android body double of another country’s princess. Indeed, it was a claim that seemed to be nothing more than the delusions of someone with a screw loose.

There should have been no way for modern technology to create an android indistinguishable from a human—that much was clear. However, the girl in question performed feats impossible for humans: she fired destructive blasts of

light, lightning, and fire. And so... things were getting all the more puzzling.

Regardless, whether she had cogs and gears inside her or not, her beauty was unquestionable. As one might expect of a princess' body double, she was lovely and refined. If she stood there silently, you could see the refinement emanating from her.

Her hair flowed like golden threads, her eyes sparkled like sapphires, and her skin was unblemished and porcelain-like. Her features still expressed her youth, so she was more adorable than alluring, but the contours of her body still did their duty. The line from her arm to her waist drew a smooth curve, and her legs were dainty and delicate like a fawn's. Overall, there was still room for growth, but the areas that should protrude did so, the areas that should be slim were likewise, and the area around her taut thighs was...

"...Wait right there," Kyouhei groaned weakly.

He was lost for five seconds, scrubbing at his eyes three times.

He'd now taken in what was in front of him.

He took in a lungful of air, and... "What the hell are you playing at?!" he roared.

Pamil, for her part, just looked at him in confusion. "Hmm?"

"What's with that get-up?!" Kyouhei yelled, looking into the distance at her lack of understanding.

"Hm? It's an apron," she declared.

"It's just an apron!" he protested.

She was simply wearing an apron—absolutely nothing else. In other words... a naked apron! An outfit that represented a man's hopes and dreams... or something like that. The apron was even white! And then, the fanciness of it, the frill and lace decorations, made it all the more clear that she wore nothing beneath it.

"Is there something strange about that?" Pamil asked, tilting her head.

The word 'adorable' didn't do the action justice. The soft movement of her golden hair across her pale shoulder was more seductive than one might think.

There were multiple problems here.

And they mainly concerned the nethers of a healthy teen boy.

“Obviously!” Kyouhei cried, suppressing his own worldly thoughts.

She remained confused for a few moments before punching her hand in realization. “Right, sorry,” she apologized to him.

“So you get it.”

“I do,” Pamil nodded. “I went for the looks, but even if I had the looks, it’s meaningless without the heart behind it.”

“...What?”

“I forgot an important line,” she said with another deep nod. “Welcome home, Onii-chan ♪” she continued, twisting as she put her fist to her lips, but with a lack of expression, like a Vulcan. “Do you want a bath? Dinner? Or perhaps—”

“Shut up! Don’t say that! You say any more and I’ll really get angry! How’d you even connect those things?!” Kyouhei yelled, his face red.

“Ngh... What’s wrong, Kyouhei? I’m following the instructions properly,” Pamil pouted.

“The hell kind of instructions are they?!” Kyouhei demanded, hiding his energetic Johnson (so to speak) with the plastic bag in his hand. “Anyway, put some clothes on, then you can learn how to cook!”

● ● ●

Things started roughly half an hour prior, on the way home from school.

“A cooking practical?” Kyouhei asked, the pitch of his voice rising with the final word.

His question prompted an oddly eager and excited nod from the girl he was addressing. “We’ve got... a cooking lesson... it’s across the third and fourth period, and we’ll make a lot... like Hamburg steak, and soup...”

Her anachronistic bobbed hairstyle and the very round glasses on her face were her most distinguishing features. Consequently, she seemed rather plain

and unfashionable, despite her generally good-looking features. Her behavior was gloomy too, so that hurt her impression all the more. This was Sanae Murata, Kyouhei's junior and Pamil's classmate.

Their routes home started the same, so she and her friend Youko Minebe had recently become common companions for the siblings on their way home. Together, they were having a conversation after they'd just stopped at a postbox, where they usually parted ways, in the fourth block. Youko had already left.

"And... we'll eat what we make tomorrow... for lunch, so you don't need to prepare a lunchbox."

"Yup, Kyouhei, you don't need to make a lunchbox," Pamil parroted. "you can have a nice lie-in."

"Don't know why you're so proud of it, seeing as you're the reason I'm making them," Kyouhei said with a half-smile.

Well, with the fantasy (?) of her being a body double android in full flow, her behavior was just fundamentally exaggerated.

"You can have a lie-in too," he continued, turning to Sanae and making her face instantly go red as she squirmed in embarrassment.

"No, I... um... always buy something from the shop. I sometimes think I'd like a homemade lunch... but Mom works as well, so..."

"Hmm?" Pamil questioned Sanae, "You want a lunchbox too?"

"Well... eating nothing but sandwiches gets boring... but I have low blood pressure in the mornings... so cooking is dangerous, because I'm always dazed and can't do it myself..."

The words 'cooking' and 'danger,' combined with Sanae's earlier words about a 'cooking practical,' set alarm bells ringing in Kyouhei's mind.

"Pamil," he called to her.

"Hmm?"

"Have you... cooked before... ever?" As far as Kyouhei had seen at least, she'd not stood in the kitchen. So, wouldn't that mean that she'd never used a stove

or knife...? “A cooking practical’s—”

“It’s fine,” Pamil insisted with a confident nod, “I’m always watching what you’re doing.” She sounded like a kid that thought they’d get strong just by reading a martial arts manga.

“That makes me cringe. Actually, no; it scares me.”

In other words, as far as cooking went, Pamil had seen it, but never done it. While yes, people with a good amount of insight could do well even on their first attempts, Kyouhei knew from experience that expecting that situational adaptability from Pamil was akin to looking for miso ramen on a Western restaurant’s menu.

During a cooking practical, students would obviously use knives and heat, so it was more dangerous than other classes...

Pamil didn’t even have a conception of her abnormality, so she would sometimes use her Royal Fire to heat up a pot or kettle. She’d use a flash of lightning or optical beam just as easily as switching on a stove. If she did that during the practical, then the things he had kept hidden to enjoy his peaceful life could all come to light: his father’s super-legal (so to speak) acts to bring goods in from the Bergmann Kingdom, the similar methods used to get Pamil her registration, and the various dangerous items stacked in the warehouse. That would result in both father and son at the tender mercies of the police.

An unpleasant thought, a very unpleasant thought.

I... I need to teach her how to cook normally, then... he thought to himself.

“Kyouhei?” Pamil asked, watching his face grow horrified.

“Right, Pamil, we’ll do a dry-run, or just get you to cook at least something at home first.”

“Hmm? You’ll do that?”

He’d thought that, considering her self-proclaimed role as an android body double, she wouldn’t be at all interested in cooking, but she was surprisingly excited over it, and her eyes were sparkling.

“Yeah, there’s no harm in you learning how to use our kitchen as well.”

“Right!”

“It’s decided, then. In that case, I’ll drop in to the supermarket for ingredients. You go home and change. You’ve got a sweater now.”

After all, if you screwed up cooking, then you’d waste the ingredients, and you’d probably get your clothes dirty. Pamil utterly lacked common sense, so that was all the more likely.

“Got it,” Pamil smiled with a nod.

He wasn’t too happy with sending her off alone... but the rest of the journey was through the sparsely populated warehouse district. Pamil was more or less used to living around there, so he thought it’d be fine.

Right, let’s get while the getting’s good.

Kyouhei strode swiftly towards the supermarket, but then turned to just make sure of things: “Right, straight home; no stopping, okay?”

“I know.”

“See you tomorrow then, Murata-san!” Kyouhei called over his shoulder, waving his hand. Something or other had caught in his disposition... Pamil gave Sanae a short farewell as well before also leaving. Sanae was then left standing alone.

However...

“...I don’t normally cook either... I need to practice so I... don’t get in everyone’s way tomorrow... Then... I’ll make a lot and give it to S-S-Senpai...!”

She’d made her own decision. She clenched her fist, and then trotted off home.

● ● ●

We now return to the present, approximately five minutes after Pamil’s entry in her gratifying and embarrassing naked apron.

Kyouhei let out a sigh of irritation as he arranged the ingredients on the dining table. “Where the hell’d she even learn that...?!”

“From me,” came a voice from behind him. That prompted a reflexive

backstep from Kyouhei as his fist whirled around, still gripping the spring onion, in an excessively violent backfist. “Obviously, I woul—Whoa?!”

A metallic clang sounded at the same time as the panicked shout. Kyouhei turned angrily as he pulled his hand away from the pain.

“So it was you?!” Kyouhei demanded.

“Really...” said the quarterback standing imposingly in front of Kyouhei with his hands on his hips.

Quarterback: a position that plays a central role in offense in American football. Takes the snap from the center. (Hatena Diary, 2007).

“I was just standing behind you, and you didn’t even look, just attacked. You tryin’ to be some bushy-browed killer?”

Kyouhei was glaring silently at him with half-closed eyes.

The quarterback was wearing the typical helmet. Incidentally, it had a slight dent from Kyouhei’s backhand. And, for some reason or another, the quarterback was also holding a tube of mayonnaise in his right hand.

The outfit was completely different from the last time Kyouhei had seen him, but... there was no mistaking him. Actually, there was only one person daft enough to be walking around dressed up like a football player outside of a stadium: Shuuhei Nanbu, Kyouhei’s father. Well, he was always traveling the world as an “International Trader,” so even his son rarely saw him; he was more like a real-life hidden character, or something like a skyfish or *tsuchinoko*.

“I should have known,” Kyouhei grumbled. There were many things he wanted to comment on, but who knew how many hours that would take, so he just prodded him with the vegetable as he continued: “Why are you filling Pamil’s head with useless stuff?!”



“Useless?” Shuuhei questioned.

“You know...” Kyouhei started, reluctant to yell about naked aprons, “wearing the apron like...”

“Ah!” he exclaimed, nodding and pounding a fist into his other hand, “Don’t worry about it, ’twas just my consideration for my uncaring son, there’s no need to thank me.”

“As if I would!” Kyouhei roared, beating Shuuhei with the spring onion.

Obviously, Shuuhei was wearing a highly-padded American football uniform, so he didn’t even flinch.

“You’re going well the wrong way about making me happy!” Kyouhei protested.

“But it’s one of the dreams of a man, isn’t it?”

“You’re a pest!” he yelled as he continued to thrash his father with the vegetable.

As he did so, Pamil stepped into view, having finished changing. “Kyouhei, is this alright?” she asked.

“...Y-Yeah.”

Her outfit consisted of a sweater and an apron atop it, so Kyouhei was more at ease now.

“Oh, you’ve already changed,” Shuuhei said disappointedly.

“It isn’t a shame, old man. And what’s with your outfit?!” Kyouhei asked, gesturing to the sportswear and the mayonnaise.

“You don’t understand, Kyouhei?” Shuuhei questioned, his expression tightening, “You don’t understand?!”

“Wh-What...?”

With a burst of movement, Shuuhei appeared right in front of him, making him falter slightly.

Then...

“Mayo tastes great after a bath!”

Kyouhei surveyed him from head to toe... three times. Then, after about fifteen seconds of looking at him, Kyouhei spoke: “...You’ve just had a bath?”

“Yup!” Shuuhei nodded, sticking the mayonnaise bottle in through a gap in the helmet and eating it directly.

Just watching it made Kyouhei’s mouth taste all claggy.

“...I’ll ignore the outfit, I guess, but what’s with the mayonnaise?! What country has idiots that have a bath and then drink mayo straight?! That’s gonna feel awful; it’ll just put you off! What kind of mayo-maniac are you?!”

“How could you, my son? Mayonnaise is a high-protein, high-calorie food: the perfect energy source for the battlefield.”

“And this ain’t a battlefield!”

As he spoke, Kyouhei thrust the spring onion in through a gap in the helmet. The tip perfectly struck one of Shuuhei’s eyes. “Argh, my eye! My eye!”

Ignoring his father’s cries, like the man was some lolicon colonel, Kyouhei faced Pamil. “The nuisance is dealt with; let’s get cooking.”

● ● ●

And thus, the two were standing wearing aprons over their clothes in the kitchen... or an area of the warehouse with a water supply and a set of cookware.

“Let’s start with the basics,” Kyouhei began.

As far as Shuuhei went, he had removed the football gear, but was still slurping at his mayonnaise tube as he sat at the table, watching them with a grin.

“Right...” Kyouhei hesitated.

He’d worried where to begin teaching her from... He didn’t know exactly what she already knew after all, so he decided to kick things off with something rather clichéd.

“We’ll go for a sunny-side up first,” he told her, holding an egg fresh from the

newly-opened pack towards her.

That really was the basics of cooking with heat. All you needed to do was make sure the heat wasn't high enough to burn the egg, season it with salt, and then you were done. It was one of the simplest dishes with the fewest ways to fail. You could also flip it and fry both sides, cover the pan with a lid and steam it, leaving the yolk half done, and so on; there were a lot of techniques you could use while making it.

Anyway, he'd picked this dish to familiarize her with cooking.

"Sunny-side up?" she asked in confusion. "A side that's sunny, facing up, and an egg. Oh, I see, you take the top half of whatever this egg hatches into and cook it?!"

"As if! The hell kind of cooking is that?! How'd you even come up with that; it's scary!"

"Hm?"

"You just break the shell and fry what's inside. It looks like a sun in the clouds, right? You've had it with steak loads of times! You know, the yellow and white —"

"Oh, that flat thing!"

"...What did you think it was before now?" Kyouhei sighed exhaustedly. "Anyway, yeah, sunny-side up."

Already Kyouhei was uneasy about what the future would hold as he put a frying pan on the stove and put a light under it.

"When you cook, anything you burn can stick to the pan. This is a stainless steel pan, so it shouldn't stick even if you run out of oil," he began by telling her, pouring a little oil into the pan and rotating it around with his wrist to coat the entire surface. "The ones at school are cheap, and so it's easy to burn things, so make sure you add enough oil. Cover the whole thing, like this."

"Right, right."

"Then, all you need to do is break the egg into the pan and fry it."

He knocked the egg on the rim of the pan before using his fingers to split it

apart.

Then, he noticed something.

“Ah... there’s a trick to doing it one-handed, so you should break it into another container and then move it from there to the pan.”

“Right, right.”

Whether she was really taking in what he was saying or not, she nodded along as she watched the egg bubble away in the pan.

There was a nagging discomfort bothering him, but he pressed on ahead: “You just use salt and pepper to season it. You judge by eye, but a light sprinkle should do it. There, now you try,” he told her, gesturing to the pan with his empty hand.

“Right, leave it to me,” she declared with a deep nod, taking an egg.

With terrifyingly smooth movements, she’d taken the egg and broken it, dropping the contents into the pan. One-handed. The movements she’d made were exactly the same as his. She was imitating him flawlessly after having only seen it once.

...Did she copy it?

This kind of thing always made Kyouhei consider that she really might be an android. At the same time, he realized he wasn’t exactly happy about it. At this rate, there wouldn’t be a need for him to teach her for too long.

...Well, it saves me the bother, he told himself before adding to his instructions.

“Right, a big part of cooking is using the right heat. Sunny-side ups need a low heat—”

He only got halfway through his sentence.

“Royal,” Pamil started yelling, drowning him out, “Beeeeaaaaaammm!”

Accompanied by a now very familiar sound, beams shot from Pamil’s eyes and engulfed the pan. Instantly, the spreading egg exploded, like it’d been put in the microwave. Moreover, the beam reflected off the pan and skimmed past his

temple before disappearing into the distance... followed by the familiar sound of shattering glass.

In fairness... Pamil had moderated her output. Ordinarily, it wouldn't have bounced off the pan, it would have destroyed the whole stove.

Anyway.

The bit of egg that hit Kyouhei's face slid slowly over his glasses.

Five seconds passed.

"You moroooooonn!" he yelled, chopping at the back of her head.

Pamil wasn't bothered, though; she seemed more surprised that the egg had exploded. "Hmm, it exploded."

"It didn't just happen! What are you playing at?!"

In a way, it was exactly what he'd expected...

"Well, they're called fried eggs, so I thought I needed to fry it."

"Who uses a beam to fry things?! What do you think the pan and stove are for! And I told you to begin with that you wouldn't need any royal powers for cooking!"

"But, Kyouhei," she protested, looking at the stove, "this way is more energy-efficient. It doesn't waste anything, so it's good for the environment!"

"Worry about how you should be acting before worrying about the environment!"

As Kyouhei ranted, the sound of Shuuhei's unconcerned guffawing echoed in the background.

With a vein pulsing in his temple, Kyouhei turned to his father and glared. "And you, stop your laughing!" His remonstration finished, so he turned back to Pamil. "Anyway, there's no point in trying to be energy-efficient and eco-friendly if you blow the egg up!"

"Hmm, I get it, I'll use less power next time."

"There shouldn't be a next time! Leave off with the beam!"

“Hrmm.”

“What do you think we’re practicing for?!” he demanded. “Anyway, do it again!” As he spoke, Kyouhei pointed at the pack of eggs.

He’d thought something like this might happen, so he’d bought a lot. There were nearly three full packs left; nearly 30 eggs.

However...

Kyouhei hadn’t yet realized that this was just the beginning, even if it was a common occurrence.

● ● ●

Hamburg steak—something of a staple for cooking lessons.

It took a fair bit of time and effort, but it was fundamentally rather simple. It would be no exaggeration to call it a beginner’s dish. If you could follow a recipe, you could make it, and it should taste decent at least.

First, you peeled an onion, diced it, and fried it until it became golden-brown. Then, you used a mixing bowl to combine the onion, meat, milk, breadcrumbs, and an egg. Next, you shaped it and fried it carefully to avoid burning it. You could judge when it was done rather easily from the color of the meat juices.

There were several hurdles to making it, but each step was doable. Thus, it was obvious that Kyouhei would choose it for practice.

Especially considering...

“Hamburg steak! That’s what I want!” Pamil exclaimed, picking it out from amongst several options.

Whether she picked it through confidence in herself or because she was fixated on it, he couldn’t tell. Either way, there was nothing wrong with being proactive, but...

“Hmm...”

Two onions rolled across a white plastic chopping board. Pamil picked them up with her pale fingers. The blonde beauty’s gaze as she glared at the onions was like a martial artist’s entering the ring. Suddenly, she tossed them into the

air, as if she were juggling them.

Then...

“Hah!”

...she split the air.

Pamil let out a breath like a true master of *iai*, her hands vanishing, moving so fast they didn't even leave an afterimage.

Kyouhei heard the air split... As he watched in bafflement, the onions dropped onto the board, now missing their skin.

And a couple of seconds later...

“Geh,” Kyouhei groaned.

Suddenly, the onions lost their shape and fell apart, covering the board in small dice.

“...Done!” Pamil proclaimed with a bright smile and a nod.

Without a moment's delay...

“Don't you ‘done’ me!” Kyouhei yelled, chopping the back of her head as he pointed at the knife next to the board.

“I told you to use the knife! Why did you just use your hand?!” he demanded.

“I didn't just use my hand,” she explained, “I used the vacuum caused by moving my hand at high speed, splitting the air, like the *kamaitachi*. It wouldn't cut things like metal, but something like an onion is easy. And because it destroys the cell membranes almost instantaneously, it keeps the release of diallyl sulfide to a minimum, so you won't cry! I shall call my new technique Royal Cutter and—”

“What assassin skills are you inheriting?!” Kyouhei yelled over her proud explanation, having had enough. “We're cooking! Leave the royalty stuff! Why are you so...”

Kyouhei trailed off, slumping.

“Kyouhei,” Pamil encouraged him, “I don't know exactly what happened, but when people give up, that's when they lose.”

“...I wouldn’t mind hearing that from someone else, but not from you!”

“Hmm?”

“...Just forget it,” he decided. “Now, take a shot at those onions!”

“Hmm, I’ll definitely take a shot,” she said. “Hmph!”

Without hesitation, Pamil had brought down her fist onto the chopping board. The mound of onion dice, or at least a portion of them, squished under her hand, and the rest went flying everywhere.

“Umm... What exactly were you attempting on this occasion?” he murmured, shocked at the tide of onion that had come his way.

“I took a shot at them, as you can see,” Pamil answered easily.

Kyouhei had contained the energy of his anger, but with this new development, that he’d hesitate to call a clichéd misunderstanding, he felt his blood boil.

“Not take a literal shot; a shot at *cooking* them! An attempt! I didn’t mean ‘break chops,’ or ‘knock out,’ or ‘knock up,’ or even ‘rough up’; just *fry* them!”

“I can make them fly?”

“Don’t! I don’t mean ‘fly’ either! Heat them up and mix them around in the frying pan!” Kyouhei felt his breath grow short as he raved. “...Honestly...”

They could collect the dice that had flown away, but over half of it was unrecoverable; it had been squashed and was semi-liquid now, like it’d been through a blender.

“Why... Why can’t you do such a simple thing...? Are you doing it on purpose?!” he demanded.

“Doing what?” she asked innocently, not an ounce of mischief in her eyes.

Well, this certainly did make the next day’s cooking lesson seem hopeless.

Kyouhei staggered with vertigo...

Then, he looked at the frying pan and felt his expression twitch.

Let us first explain something: A frying pan is a type of pan used in a kitchen, primarily for frying and grilling. Compared to other types of pan, it is shallow with a large diameter. As the pan is not particularly deep, it has a commensurately low capacity. These pans are usually used for shallow-frying and similar techniques, but it is of course possible to deep-fry using one. Depending on the accessories, it is also possible to steam things with it, but in the majority of cases, it is used without a lid. (Wikipedia, 2007).

In other words, you couldn't call a frying pan something you could use to simmer.

And yet...

Kyouhei let out a strangled noise. The pan was filled with a bubbling liquid on the highest heat.

Kyouhei, of course, had no recollection of filling the pan with liquid, which meant...

"...Pamil," he said, foreboding running down his spine.

"What, Kyouhei?"

"Why... did you put water in the pan? I don't remember telling you to boil any water."

"Hm? I didn't."

"But look in the pan."

"I only used what you told me to. This is all I've put in," she said, lifting something.

The object in her hand was a half-empty plastic bottle. The label on it said "rapeseed oil."

Which meant... it was oil over high heat, so at any moment...

"Pamil, get down!" Kyouhei yelled, grabbing her arm and pushing her to the floor, covering her with his body.

At the same time...

The oil in the pan went up in flames with a roar. The pillar of flame billowed into the air, lighting the area in scarlet. The oil didn't explode, but the heat scorched across Kyouhei's back.

"Ack."

"Whoa?!" even Shuuhei, who had been cackling until that point, cried out in surprise.

"Water—Wait, not water!" he said reflexively before remonstrating himself.

Normally, people would indeed use water to put out fires, but it was counterproductive for oil fires. If you put water on an oil fire, it would spray burning oil everywhere and make things even worse.

And so...

It'd be really bad for us!

The warehouse was filled with Shuuhei's goods, and many of them had blatant hazard symbols, or warnings against ignition sources printed on them. In other words, there were many flammable items around, and probably a fair amount of gunpowder and ammunition. If they caught fire, then the whole district would be at risk, not just the warehouse.

"Hmm?" Pamil blinked, not getting what had happened as she laid underneath Kyouhei.

"So you prefer sweater aprons to naked aprons," Shuuhei noted. "Right, I'll remember your depravities."

"Don't you dare!" Kyouhei yelled, looking around. "Fire extinguisher! Where's the fire extinguisher?!"

Eventually, a fire extinguisher caught Kyouhei's roving gaze. He hurriedly ran over to the wall it was fixed to, took it, and hefted it under his arm. Then, he ran back to the kitchen. He ripped the pin out, pointed the hose at the fire, and pulled the lever. Even a firefighter would have been impressed at his technique.

However, the torrent of white powder... did not issue forth.

Kyouhei stared in shock at the unresponsive extinguisher. "W-Why isn't it working?!"

“Man, that’s a surprise,” said Shuuhei, unconcerned despite the circumstances. “I mean, you only get about one in a thousand faulty ones—wouldn’t have expected ours to be one.”

“Don’t sound so happy about it!” he yelled, grabbing Shuuhei by the chest and shaking him.

Shuuhei, of all people, should have known the kinds of things that he’d filled the warehouse with.

In a panic, Kyouhei looked around, his eyes falling on his phone atop the table. Should he call the fire brigade? If he did that, though, the illegal goods filling the warehouse would be discovered. Shuuhei would be arrested, that much was a given, but seeing as Kyouhei had remained silent, he would be taken in as an accomplice. Plus, who knew when the things would catch fire and detonate.

What do I do?!

“Panic not, my son,” Shuuhei spoke calmly. He was being solemn, and his face seemed completely trustworthy. “If you panic, you can solve nothing. First... yes, take a slurp of mayonnaise and calm yourself!”

“You calm down first!” Kyouhei yelled, batting the mayonnaise tube away.

But then...

“Wha...”

As Shuuhei let out a dull noise, the container flew through the air. It drew an elegant parabola as it plonked itself right into the burning pan. As it landed inside with a dull thud, the flames billowed again, but only for a moment. Quickly, the billowing flames vanished... and were replaced by black smoke issuing from the pan, the stench of something burning, and the thick scent of mayonnaise.

Kyouhei stared wordlessly at the pan.

Eventually, he remembered a saying: “Use mayonnaise on oil fires.”

To put it simply, the fire had melted the tube, and then the protein of the mayonnaise had heated up and formed a film, starving the flames of oxygen.

“Whoa... Mayonnaise is wonderful!” Shuuhei yelled, clenching a fist. “Behold! The wishes of the country’s mayo-lovers calmed the fire!”

“It’s just a chemical reaction!” Kyouhei shouted back, knocking Shuuhei out before putting a lid on the pan to make sure it didn’t catch fire again.

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In the end, Kyouhei decided the kitchen wasn’t salvageable without a lot of time spent cleaning, so he headed out to buy three lunches.

He sighed, going through the usual security procedures and stepping inside. Then, the sight before him made him forget to call out that he’d gotten home.

“Oh, Kyouhei, welcome back,” said, as you might expect, a sooty-faced Pamil.

She was still wearing the apron, and her pale limbs were blackened by soot. Her hair was plastered to her forehead by sweat.

She’d... probably been cleaning.

Apparently, she and Shuuhei had been cleaning while he was out. Even with the two of them, it would have been tough to get it all done in half an hour.

And...

“...You...”

There was something on the table.

“Indeed. I decided to try one more time, but it didn’t go too well,” she said with a reluctant smile.

Next to her, on the table, was a plate with—admittedly a burnt and inedible example of—a Hamburg steak and a sunny-side-up egg.



“I got a lot of the tricks to things, though. I think that I’ll be fine—”

“Pamil, why?” Kyouhei started.

“What?” she asked.

“Why are you so fixated on the Hamburg steak...?”

“Ah, well... it’s special,” she answered.

“Why?”

“Because eating Hamburg steak cheers you right up!” she explained completely seriously.

She wasn’t an elementary schooler, though, so she probably knew that the meal itself wouldn’t change someone’s mood like that.

She must have seen the doubt on his face, because she continued: “It made me much happier, didn’t it?”

“Huh?”

“That’s what you made me when we first met, isn’t it?” she asked.

He certainly had cooked that on that day. He’d just chosen it because it would be more familiar to her, seeing as she looked like a foreigner.

However...

“So I wanted to learn how to make it at some point, because you helped me so much.”

She wanted to repay him for cheering her up by making the same meal for him. That was why she’d chosen that meal. It was also why, rather than complaining about the practice, she’d thrown herself into it.

“...So that’s what it was,” he sighed.

At that point, Shuuhei returned, carrying some kind of bottle.

“Oh, you’re back, Kyouhei.”

“Y-Yeah, what’s that?”

“Huh, well, Pamil cooked her first meal,” he said, showing the bottle, which

was labeled “100% grape juice from concentrate.” “I wanted to open up a bottle of wine or champagne, but you probably wouldn’t drink it,” he griped.

“Obviously, I’m a minor,” he said, smiling reluctantly.

This kind of meal wasn’t bad once in a while.

“Go get changed and wash your face,” Kyouhei said to Pamil, resting a hand on her blonde hair. “Then we’ll have dinner—a specially-made Hamburg steak.”

“...Right!” she exclaimed, her face covered in soot, but with an irrepressible grin as well.

...Incidentally, next was the actual practical. The next day, though, Kyouhei and Shuuhei were both struck by diarrhea and couldn’t leave the house. Pamil took the day off to nurse them, so she ended up missing the lesson in question.

The reason was fairly obvious.

Nevertheless, Kyouhei looked oddly happy, which drew a curious look from Pamil.

Side Story - Goddess of the Lake

Once upon a time, there was a young woodcutter.

The young woodcutter loved... to at least a certain extent, peace and normalcy, and believed not standing out and having an ordinary life to be a happiness beyond comparison. Despite his youth, the woodcutter lacked any grand ambition, but then again, the protagonists of all the stories back then were much the same, so there's no avoiding it.

One day, while he was working, the young woodcutter came across a large lake as he pushed his way through the forest. It was a gorgeous lake, with crystal-clear water; looking into its depths reflected his face on the surface, almost like a mirror. But in fact, the woodcutter was lost in observing its surface because he had dropped a certain thing...



“...This is bad,” muttered a voice in the depths of the thick forest.

Tall trees spread their branches wide into the air, covering the area with countless leaves. The green canopy blocked out the blazing sun, and only a few thin shafts of light reached the ground. The area was neither too bright nor too dark; not too hot or too cold—it would be the perfect place to take a nap if there were somewhere to lie down.

However...

“I can’t believe that happened,” said a young man as he moved restlessly back and forth through the mottled light. For the sake of argument, let’s call him Kyouhei Nanbu (17 years old). Truly just for the sake of argument. The youth, despite the great location, was far from in the mood for a nap.

(So-called) Kyouhei Nanbu was a woodcutter. His clothes were antiquated European wear from the middle ages. He wore a brown tunic lined with animal pelt and sewn trousers called *braccae*. Even his feet were wrapped in hand-sewn shoes. For some reason, he wore glasses, despite them being an ultra-

luxury item in those times, but it's symbolism or something, so don't pay it any mind.

Regardless, had he an axe over his shoulder, anyone would have recognized him as a murder—I mean, woodcutter.

...But now, he was empty-handed. The tool of his trade, which should have been to hand at all times, was nowhere to be seen.

“Now what should I do, just go back and sleep?” (so-called) Kyouhei muttered to himself with a frown.

A lake spread out before him, filled with cool water. It was a little over 50 meters in diameter... although, to say it the old European way out, the measure should probably be in yards, but it's just symbolism so (etc., etc.). The lake was also rather deep-looking, though it was hard to judge by eye.

“I wonder,” he muttered to himself again, “if this would count as... murder?”

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Approximately 15 minutes prior, (so-called) Kyouhei had entered the forest with his axe in hand to carry out his work, as always.

The woods were far removed from the hubbub of the streets, so they were relatively quiet. Though, if he strained his ears, he could faintly hear the sounds of the trees swaying in the wind and birds chirping. The peaceful environs went a long way to easing (so-called) Kyouhei's heart.

“Ahh...” (so-called) Kyouhei sighed happily after taking a deep breath of the forest air.

As a rule, the young woodcutter believed there was nothing better than peace, so he adored throwing himself into his work.

But...

“Man, what's with this place? There's no one here!” spoke an unhappy voice from behind (so-called) Kyouhei as he enjoyed the tranquility.

A displeased expression on his face, (so-called) Kyouhei turned around. Before him stood his opposite in all things: the person wore gaudy, eye-catching clothes, and was peering all around.

Let's call him Mizuhito Hibiki. Just for the sake of the story. Anyway. (So-called) Mizuhito was as flashy as a peacock in mating season.

Firstly, his hair was dyed scarlet, and he had a dragon tattooed on his cheek.

Those features alone would have had him stand out, but his clothing took the cake. His feet were in sandals, and he wore a *chiton*—a loose set of clothing that left half of his chest on display. Although the one he wore fell to his thighs, so perhaps it would be more accurate to call it a *chitoniskos*. On top of that, he wore a mantle (cloak) fastened with a pin.

Incidentally, he (for some reason) carried an extravagantly decorated lyre under his arm.

All in all, he looked out of place both spatially and temporally.

"...Let me say one thing, (so-called) Mizuhito," (so-called) Kyouhei said, giving a harsh look to the youth that looked like he'd just stepped out of ancient Greece.

"What, Kyouhei?" (so-called) Mizuhito asked, strumming at his lyre. The sound was far duller and cheap-sounding than expected considering its appearance. The emotionless notes echoed through the trees.

"Add the '(so-called),' remember the '(so-called)!' More importantly, just in case, do you even realize you're a woodcutter?" (so-called) Kyouhei groaned, recovering from the onslaught of discomfort just engendered.

"I do," (so-called) Mizuhito answered.

"Then, what's with that getup?"

"Getup?"

"That's not a woodcutter's outfit. What are you trying to pull with it?! It's the wrong place and time for it!"

(So-called) Mizuhito blinked, then nodded as he spoke: "Kyouhei, you—"

"I've already told you, use the '(so-called)!'"

"That doesn't matter, alright? Following things because 'that's how they should be' is a meaningless affectation that holds back progress."

“I don’t get what you mean!” (so-called) Kyouhei cried out.

“Anyway, what about your axe?!” (so-called) Mizuhito demanded, pointing to (so-called) Kyouhei’s axe. It almost seemed like a noise should accompany it, like: “That’s right out.”

“What’s out about it?”

“What are you planning to do with it?”

“Chop down trees, obviously.”

“No. Just no, Kyouhei!” (so-called) Mizuhito spoke, putting his palm to his forehead to declare his lament. “Why can you not see that such is the graveyard of possibility?!”

“What should I do then?”

“Something like...” (so-called) Mizuhito began, taking the axe from (so-called) Kyouhei’s hand and swinging it into a nearby tree. The axe thudded horizontally into the tree trunk. “See?” (so-called) Mizuhito asked.

“Don’t you ‘see’ me; that’s just cutting the tree down.”

“Then, if you do this,” (so-called) Mizuhito continued, perching on the tree-bound axe, “you can use the axe as a chair!” Kyouhei had no answer. “It was also an execution tool in the middle ages. It doesn’t just cut wood, it can cleave a person’s neck too! If you wanted to, when your dad’s sleep—”

“Stop right there, just don’t go any further, it’s dangerous,” (so-called) Kyouhei groaned, putting his hand on the haft of the axe to pull it from the tree. It was strangely deeply embedded, so he couldn’t really budge it. “The hell, damn,” (so-called) Kyouhei cursed.

“Actually,” (so-called) Mizuhito said, scratching at his cheek as he watched (so-called) Kyouhei struggle, “woodcutting’s a pretty dull and hidden job—what’s the point?”

“Apologize to the woodcutters of the country. And you can start with me.”

“It’s just: cut the tree, sell the wood. Cut, sell. There’s no motivation; no standing out. And we’re working in a deserted forest... it’s boring.”

“Whether there’s people or not, you—”

“Ah, right!” (so-called) Mizuhito nodded, clearly deciding the conversion was going nowhere. “If there’s no one here, we’ll just have to bring them ourselves. We gotta have a bonfire if we get people together outdoors like this. Right, let’s light the forest and get a campfire going, we’ll get it roaring!”

“You’re going to wreck nature to stand out?!” (so-called) Kyouhei cried out, roundhouse kicking (so-called) Mizuhito in the back.

Tempered from his toils as a woodcutter, the kick was stronger than he anticipated, so (so-called) Mizuhito went flying with a bizarre cry, hitting the floor and rolling.

In his path... possibly through some cruel whimsy of God or fate... was a large lake.

The pseudo-Grecian youth fell towards it.

Then...

Splash!

The formerly peaceful surface of the lake was now rough as a spray of water rose. Several rings of ripples disturbed the pool’s surface, but (so-called) Mizuhito was nowhere to be seen.

(So-called) Kyouhei stared wide-eyed into the depths. “Well, knowing him, he’ll be up in a minute with some crap about being ‘a bloke that looks good soaked as well...’” he told himself.

Time passed.

He didn’t appear.

“Huh...?”

Everything went quiet.

A mere three revolutions of the second hand of the clock had passed (don’t concern yourself with whether commoners would have watches with second

hands upon their wrists in this era), and Kyouhei finally realized that Mizuhito had sunk and wasn't floating up.

● ● ●

Now, back to the point at hand. (So-called) Kyouhei was thinking as he stared into the lake's depths.

"Hmmm..." he racked his brain.

"Something seems to be troubling you," came a gentle voice.

Astounded at the sudden address, (so-called) Kyouhei looked around.

Of course, there was no one in the surroundings.

But then...

"Here, over here," the voice calling for (so-called) Kyouhei was coming from, of all places, the lake.

And...

Beyond all semblance of logic and reason, there was a figure rising to the surface of the lake, like she was held up by stage equipment in a theater.

She was a prim and proper beauty.

She was the image of a goddess of legends.

She had brownish hair draping over her shoulders, and wore a swaying white veil on her head. Her wide eyes looked sleepily out, and her gaze had the ability to calm people with their harmlessness. She was clad in a fluttering white robe and wore sandals on her feet. Despite having clearly been soaking in the lake, there was not a drop of water on her.

"W-Who are you?" (so-called) Kyouhei stuttered.

"I'm the goddess of the lake," she said calmly. "For now at least, you can call me Kaoruko Houwa (unknown years of age♪)."

(So-called) Kyouhei sighed, halfway from exhaustion and halfway from shock.

(So-called) Kaoruko then continued, saying: "You've dropped something very precious into the lake, I'll pick it up for you."

“He’s not really all that precious, and I get the feeling that it’d be less trouble to leave him down there,” (so-called) Kyouhei admitted, accidentally letting out his real thoughts.

“But then you’ll be a murderer?”

“Ugh...” (so-called) Kyouhei managed, lost for words at the painful statement.

Whatever she thought of him, (so-called) Kaoruko crouched on the surface. How she did that was a mystery, but it was probably one of the goddess’ powers. (So-called) Kyouhei decided that discretion was the better part of valor here.

“Well, I don’t know what you’ve dropped, so could you check it for me?”

(So-called) Kyouhei let out a sigh. “...Are there that many things dropped into the lake?”

“There’s a sign that tells them not to, but a lot of people throw offerings in.”

(So-called) Kyouhei didn’t think you’d be able to mistake a person for an offering, but decided that discretion (etc.).

So...

“Did you drop...” (so-called) Kaoruko began, pulling out two figures from the lake, “this ‘spectacled swot (so-called) Mizuhito?’”

The figure was certainly that of (so-called) Mizuhito... but something was wrong.

He was wearing the same bizarre clothes; the pseudo-Grecian outfit and tribal tattoo (actually a transfer) were the same, but... his expression was different.

He looked completely unconcerned with playing around and mischief. His brow was furrowed in deep thought. The glasses on his face—surely there for some kind of joke—shone in the light.

And...

“Listen, studying is life. Woodcutting isn’t just about swinging an axe around,” (so-called) Mizuhito suddenly said, the goddess still holding him by the scruff of the neck. “Skilled woodcutters say that experience is everything, but they’re

just unconsciously practicing statistics derived from that experience. Should one study mechanics and physics, they would be able to obtain a similar level of efficiency and skill.” (So-called) Kyouhei stared at him. “Listen, the motion of all bodies can be predicted through mechanics. As can material strength. Even if you can’t go as far as Laplace’s Demon, you can effectively calculate and reproduce real events, and constantly—” (so-called) Mizuhito kept on talking and talking without pause.

He was intelligent to begin with... but he certainly wasn’t one to say that kind of thing in that tone.

Actually, hearing that sermon coming out from (so-called) Mizuhito’s mouth was depressing.

“Wait, just wait a minute!” (so-called) Kyouhei yelled, finally gathering his wits. “What’s with him?”

“It’s (so-called) Mizuhito-kun?” (so-called) Kaoruko asked to confirm. “Is there a problem?”

“Loads of them! This is obviously a different person! Where’d you even get him from?!”

“There’s nothing a goddess cannot do♪” Ignoring (so-called) Kyouhei’s loss of speech, the goddess of the lake continued: “If it’s not ‘spectacled swot (so-called) Mizuhito,’ then maybe it’s this ‘full-of-kindness (so-called) Mizuhito?’”

That was the second person she had picked up.

“All mankind are siblings...”

That was another extreme.

The clothing he wore and his face were the same as (so-called) Mizuhito’s, though this one wasn’t wearing glasses.

His expression, though, was rather different. His gaze was filled with affection, and his lips had curved into a kind smile. His arms were spread like an opera singer’s (which, in this era... etc., etc.) as he spoke almost like a preacher.

“People come to understand each other through conversation. Does strife or dispute bear any fruit? Cooperation is sacred. Peace and tranquility are the

pinnacles of existence.”

It was also oddly depressing. Or rather, dubious.

Well, he was talking the talk, but hearing a tattooed punk rocker (I thank all you readers for your patience and understanding) made it seem completely insincere.

“Which (so-called) Mizuhito-kun did you drop?”

“Neither,” he told her bluntly.

“Eh?”

“They’re both completely, utterly, outrageously wrong.”

“That’s a bother,” she said thoughtfully, “we don’t have any more in stock.”

“Stock? You just said ‘stock?!’ Are you just trying to palm off the rest with false advertising?!”

“Not at all,” denied (so-called) Kaoruko with a shake of her head, “it was a joke.” (So-called) Kyouhei was silent. “So, which (so-called) Mizuhito did you drop?”

He wanted to spend an hour or so explaining the exact meaning of the word ‘joke’ to the self-proclaimed goddess, but thought it’d be a waste of time.

“Do I have to pick one...?” he asked.

“If you don’t, I can’t give him back.”

(So-called) Kyouhei frowned as he looked between the two (so-called) Mizuhitos with a grumble.

Even now, the spectacted swot (so-called) Mizuhito was continuing on about complicated theories regardless of everyone else. He’d currently moved on to discussing the merits of maids, and the Copernican revolution’s influence on the criminology of Lombroso, but the exact contents didn’t matter.

Moving on.

The full-of-kindness (so-called) Mizuhito was quietly smiling as he prayed for world peace. He’d probably be satisfied with sound arguments, and he was fairly quiet.

If he had to choose one, he'd obviously go with the least bad option.

"Uhh... Then, I'll go with the full-of-kindness (so-called) Mizuhito," he said.

Well, that'd be far better than the (so-called) Mizuhito that would set the forest alight to draw attention. Thus, Kyouhei made his decision.

"(So-called) Kyouhei-kun? You know you shouldn't lie, don't you?"

"Wha... Hey, what do you mean?!"

"You didn't drop either of these (so-called) Mizuhito-kuns, did you?"

"You're the one that told me I had to pick one of them!"

"I can't heaaar you," she singsonged, wriggling around whilst still holding the two (so-called) Mizuhitos. "As a punishment for your lies, I'll give you the spectacled swot (so-called) Mizuhito and the real (so-called) Mizuhito."

"Eh, wai—" (so-called) Kyouhei began to protest, but the goddess that had brought forth the (so-called) Mizuhitos soon disappeared with the full-of-kindness (so-called) Mizuhito, just leaving behind a smile.

"Lies," the leftover spectacled swot (so-called) Mizuhito began as he climbed the shore, adjusting the bridge of his glasses with a finger. "Lies are the embodiment of a child's independence. They are what a child uses to first guarantee his own mental boundaries from a life that has thus far been controlled by his parents, a youth's first steps into the world." He continued, despite (so-called) Kyouhei not listening.

This on its own was depressing enough, but...

"Man, that was awful," complained a second (so-called) Mizuhito, climbing out of the water. "Ah, but won't walking around sodden get me loads of attention?!"

This was the (so-called) Mizuhito that (so-called) Kyouhei knew well, with the lyre under his arm. His body and soul were both like evangelists for attention.

The two (so-called) Mizuhitos stood before him. They showed no sign of vanishing like a phantom or dream.

"No way..." (so-called) Kyouhei got out, paling.



Once upon a time, there was a young woodcutter.

One day, after entering a dense forest to work, he accidentally dropped a certain something into a big lake—you get the idea).



A Shinto priest was standing in front of (so-called) Kyouhei as he entered the forest to work.

The priest was wearing a loose, long-cuffed gray robe, with a mistletoe used for festivals in his belt; a panacea.

He had an oaken staff in his hands, and despite the lack of need, it had an ostentatious molding at its tip, making it look much like a magic staff. He looked more like a mage than a priest, but he had “Shinto priest” written in large text across his chest.

“You seem to be troubled,” the priest in his path proclaimed, spreading his arms.

The way he spoke wasn’t like a priest either, but that’s not the problem.

A few moments passed in silence.

The second hand (though in this era, etc.) only rotated once before (so-called) Kyouhei opened his mouth tiredly: “...What are you doing, you damned old man.”

This priest was (so-called) Kyouhei’s father.

For now, only for now, we can call him Shuuhei and so on.

“What’s with your bad mood, (so-called) Kyouhei? You’ll make your dad sad.”

“Will I now? I’m honestly tired of having such an annoying man as my dad. Anyway, seriously, what are you doing? What’s with that getup? Are you trying to be a *hexer*?”

The last time he had seen his father, (so-called) Shuuhei had been dressed as a shepherd. He’d had a horn in one hand and been going on about the world ending or something.

The time before that, he'd been wearing a straw coat and carrying a huge hammer, like a blacksmith. Obviously, he didn't have the ability (skills) for those jobs, he'd just dressed up that way.

Incidentally, as far as (so-called) Kyouhei knew, his real job was that of a peddler.

Now...

"A good question, my son! As I should hope!" (so-called) Shuuhei said with a prideful smile. "It is a necessary outfit to allow my business to go smoothly. With these clothes, I can sell ordinary branches to people that mistake them for having magic—"

"That's just fraud, isn't it?!" (so-called) Kyouhei cried out, a vein pulsing in his temple.

"Not at all, (so-called) Kyouhei, your father is selling dreams," he declared shamelessly.

"You're trying to be an author now?!"

In the blink of an eye, (so-called) Kyouhei had launched a right straight at (so-called) Shuuhei. His body took the hit directly, spinning through the air like he was wire-flying, a needlessly extravagant reaction as he acted like a spinning top.

His landing place, though... was a lake full of crystal-clear water.

By the time (so-called) Kyouhei had realized what was happening, it was too late.

Splash!

With a jet of water, (so-called) Shuuhei disappeared beneath the surface.

(So-called) Kyouhei had bad memories of that lake.

"It can't be..." (so-called) Kyouhei murmured, a trail of sweat running down his cheek.

“Oh my, oh my my my, you’ve dropped something again,” said a person, rising from the lake, ignoring all nature, logic, reason, and anything else of that ilk. Well, she was actually a goddess, so we should have probably used that word, but let’s ignore that.

(So-called) Kyouhei decided to pretend that he had seen nothing and tried to leave the area. Instantly though, he was forced to stop and turn around—someone’s hand had caught him by the collar.

The culprit, of course, was (so-called) Kaoruko.

“Wait wait wait, why are you leaving?”

Her right hand had caught him like it was nothing.

“Goddess,” he said, “humans are capable of learning. You’ll just ask which one I dropped again, right? Getting caught once is a learning experience, but getting caught a second time is just stupid, so I’ll follow that experience and leave. A wise man avoids danger.”

“I think referencing Confucius with a European outlook from the middle ages is a bit inappropriate.”

“And I think your lines themselves are inappropriate too,” (so-called) Kyouhei countered.

Of course, the goddess didn’t listen to any inconvenient complaints like that. Gods are atemporal, though, so it’s just one of those things.

“But if you leave, it’d become a murder...”

“It’s fine, I’m his only relative, so no one will know if I just stay quiet,” (so-called) Kyouhei told her.

“Don’t you have any conscience or morals?”

“They don’t apply to him,” he said bluntly. “Besides, he’s stupidly hardy, he’ll climb out on his own. I... believe in my dad!”

“Adding that at the end so dramatically won’t convince anyone. If you just leave like this, I’ll lose my identity as the goddess of the lake!” she pleaded, staring earnestly at him.

(So-called) Kyouhei let out a growl. Surely no man would be able to deny such an entreating look from her gentle eyes. (So-called) Kaoruko was good at pleading for care, despite her divinity.

Sighing, (so-called) Kyouhei turned back to the lake.

“Fine... but if there’s consequences like last time, tell me first.”

“Sure. Well then,” she said with a happy nod, stooping and putting her right hand under the surface, “was this ‘pigheaded (so-called) Shuuhei’ what you dropped?”

It went without saying that she had pulled out a (so-called) Shuuhei. It also went without saying that it was not the (so-called) Shuuhei that (so-called) Kyouhei knew.

He had a constantly scowling countenance, with his arms folded threateningly in front of his chest. He even wore a headband—the picture of a pigheaded person.

“Listen up, peddling is a fine job. It’s illegal, and you’re a nomad, and decried by society, but some people help you! Damn it all! Say what you will—I’ll live like this. And you should follow the same way; you’re my son!”

With all that coming from pigheaded Shuuhei (Edoite ver.), and his lack of acknowledgment, (so-called) Kyouhei thought for the first time that things might not have been as bad as they could have been with his father. He didn’t think he could keep a parent-child relationship with someone pushing his own beliefs on him like that.

Well, it might have been different if what he’d been saying had been right. However, his actions were still leaning heavily towards illegality, and he still had his cosplay habits, as well as his general irresponsibility. On top of that, now his attitude was just getting worse.

In that case, his usual frivolous father would be far better.

As (so-called) Kyouhei worked through his considerations, (so-called) Kaoruko pulled another (so-called) Shuuhei from the lake.

“Or is it this ‘motherly (so-called) Shuuhei?’”

In several ways, this was far beyond (so-called) Kyouhei's imaginings.

He was wearing the same outfit as before, a gray robe. That much was fine... but he was wearing an apron on top of it for some reason. A frilly, lacy one, and to just add to it, it had the word "love" written on it in kanji.

"What is it, (so-called) Kyouhei-san?" he asked.

"... 'San?'"

"Your tunic's torn at the arm!" (so-called) Shuuhei exclaimed.

He checked and there was indeed a slight gap in the seam between the right arm and torso of the tunic. It wasn't even enough to put his little finger through it, though.

"I... uh, um, something this small... isn't something to worry about," (so-called) Kyouhei protested haltingly.

"Aren't you ashamed? You may be a man, but you should take care of your appearance! Give it here, your dad will fix it for you," motherly (so-called) Shuuhei said, leaning forwards. He already had a threaded needle in his hand.

(So-called) Kyouhei retreated instinctively, a cold sweat covering his entire body.

Regardless of how his son was reacting, motherly (so-called) Shuuhei smiled happily and said: "You don't need to worry; I'm good with my hands. Obviously, I can wash and clean too; there's no housework I cannot do!"

(So-called) Kyouhei swallowed his retort that it was motherly (so-called) Shuuhei's sanity he was concerned about.

Heedless of (so-called) Kyouhei's feelings, (so-called) Kaoruko started to speak, a strange (so-called) Shuuhei on each side of her: "Which (so-called) Shuuhei-san was it that you dropped?"

(So-called) Kyouhei looked between the two with a gulp.

Obviously, the pigheaded (so-called) Shuuhei wasn't going to happen.

Even at the best of times, (so-called) Shuuhei still messed with (so-called) Kyouhei constantly, so having to put up with a less flexible version of his father

would just be a disaster.

The motherly (so-called) Shuuhei, then?

No, not happening. However obliging he was, he didn't want to be with a dude wearing a girly apron with no shame like he was.

Besides... neither was (so-called) Shuuhei the (so-called) Shuuhei that (so-called) Kyouhei knew.

Choosing either one would be a mistake. Based on the last time, if he did so, two (so-called) Shuuheis would be released. That was the worst possible outcome, and so he wanted to avoid it.

In that case, the answer was obvious: "Neither one is the one I dropped."

"Oh, they're not?" the goddess asked somewhat disappointedly. "In that case, what about 'singing-and-dancing (so-called) Shuuhei?'"

"There's not just two?!" (so-called) Kyouhei asked, hurriedly trying to stop (so-called) Kaoruko as she plunged her right hand into the waters again.

"There's a full warranty," she told him, pulling up a (so-called) Shuuhei clad in loose white clothes, like James Dean.

"What's with this?! You didn't need to bring him out, I don't even need a (so-called) Shuuhei, so you can keep him!" he shouted plainly.

Her cheeks pinkening—for some reason—(so-called) Kaoruko looked at him and said: "You're giving him to me?"

"I am," he decided, "go ahead and do what you will with him."

"Oh myyy. Oh my, oh my, oh my, what to do," the goddess exclaimed, squirming happily. "Then, (so-called) Kyouhei-kun, you can call me 'Mama.'"

"What?"

"But," (so-called) Kaoruko said, suddenly stopping, "I feel bad for just taking him."

"Don't worry about it."

"My, what a selfless person. In that case, you can take this pigheaded (so-called) Shuuhei, and this motherly (so-called) Shuuhei."

“Wha?!”

The two of them began climbing the shores.

“Kaoruko-san!” he cried out in despair.

“That’s just an alias.”

“I told you to tell me if there was a punishment!”

“It’s not a punishment; it’s a reward,” she clarified as she crouched down to the original (so-called) Shuuhei, who was pulling himself out of the water like a koala. “Enjoy living with the both of them, okay?”

She waved, ignorant of his situation, as she went back beneath the surface with the original (so-called) Shuuhei.

And then, as would be expected...

“Damn it all!”

“(So-called) Kyouhei, I can spoil you if you’re lonely.”

All that was left was the pigheaded (so-called) Shuuhei spitting curses into the distance, and the other (so-called) Shuuhei kneeling on the floor and patting his lap.

A moment later...

“Whyyyy meeeeeeee?!”

The scream echoing through the forest was, of course, (so-called) Kyouhei’s.

● ● ●

Once upon a time, there was a young woodcutter.

One day, he accidentally dropped a certain something into a big lake as he—
(you get the idea).

● ● ●

The girl was staring ardently at (so-called) Kyouhei’s back.

“Senpai... you’re so wonderful...”

She was hidden within the shadows of the trees, almost trying to become part

of the darkness.

She had a closely-cropped bob cut, and glasses that looked like they'd been drawn with a compass (thank all of you readers for etc.). Looking closely at her let you see that she was good-looking in the same way as a doll, in a good way, but rather gloomy as a whole nonetheless. She seemed like she'd have contracted dark spirits by the dozen, and that ruined her otherwise cute appearance.

We can call her—just for the time being, of course—Sanae Murata.

She was a village girl, and wore a strappy dress over a white tunic, but it looked like black robes, a crow on her shoulder, and a huge cauldron before her would fit her better.

As ever, she had (so-called) Kyouhei under her stalking... heavy observation, rather. That kind of behavior used to be seen as proof of affection, so there wasn't really an issue in that era. Her hiding behind things was just a habit born of her guilty conscience.

Regardless.

"Ah..." (so-called) Sanae sighed in ecstasy.

Even now, her gaze was still fixed on (so-called) Kyouhei's back.

How glorious he looked carrying an axe into the forest! Though it was hardly a surprise that a loving girl would beautify him by 30%...

"Senpai..." she murmured, gripping her slender fingers around a hand-sized strawman.

It had a strap attached to its head, and a slip of paper nailed to it with "prayers of safety" written on it.

The reasons for her calling (so-called) Kyouhei "Senpai," and for having a strawman with kanji written on it, even though they were in the West, were—(you get the idea).

"For sure... I'll give this to him, and confe—!"

Handing over a strawman and confessing would probably result in failure, but the loving girl didn't realize that. It might, just might, only be (so-called) Sanae

that this was true for, though.

(So-called) Kyouhei seemed to have decided where to work today, and stopped in front of a tree.

Her heart felt fit to burst, and her expression would doubtlessly shock anyone who saw it. "...I'll do it!" she cried, bursting from the grass and out of the greenery.

(So-called) Kyouhei seemed to have noticed someone was there and turned around.

And then... he saw the following:

No one else was around.

The strawman in her hand.

Her rough breathing and bloodshot eyes.

The village girl rushing towards him.

...(So-called) Kyouhei's thoughts were probably instinctual.

Something like "I'm gonna be killed?!"

Therefore, naturally, he didn't try and stop the maiden's feelings as they gushed forth; he avoided the murderously rushing village girl.

But even that seemed different to a girl in love.

"Hauu...!"

A moment passed.

His dark hair swayed in the wind, earnest light filled his eyes. The moment he dodged, his pearly skin shone in the light, and the aristocratic lines of his face sparkled— It was clear, though, that with her thoughts running wild in the middle of her charge, *something* would happen.

(So-called) Sanae felt the world tilt. Obviously, that was her losing her balance mid-sprint.

Splash!

She plunged into the lake, a pillar of water marking her entry.

But... even as she disappeared beneath the surface, her expression was blissful.



And that's what happened.

"Was that just (so-called) Murata-san?!"

He hurriedly tossed the axe away and rushed over to the lake.

He'd only caught a glimpse of her, but he'd seen her many times when he'd gone to the village to sell his firewood. Her sudden, violent charge had made him think that she was a wild boar or some kind of bandit, so he'd dodged. Now that he was calm, though, he had noticed that she looked familiar.

But...

(So-called) Kyouhei stopped at the still-rippling pool.

This was the third time now, so...

"You called, and now I am here, ta-da♪"

(So-called) Kaoruko appeared from the lake with a gentle explanation, an awfully happy smile upon her face.

In the face of that, Kyouhei's expression and posture both collapsed at the familiar occurrence.

Silence then fell.

The second hand (you know what I'm going to say) had time to make its way halfway around. Unable to bear the silence, (so-called) Kaoruko spoke: "Um, aren't you going to react?"

"This is the third time now," he explained.

"You could be a bit more welcoming; I am a goddess."

"I might if you weren't going to hold your 'which person is the right one' show..." (so-called) Kyouhei said, glaring at her.

“A goddess can’t just pop up out of nowhere... Anyway, let’s get started and play ‘which (so-called) Sanae is the right one.’”

He wanted to grab her and start asking why she thought it would be okay to speak so casually about it, but let’s ignore that.

He really just wanted to turn on his heel and go, but (so-called) Sanae was beneath the surface, so he couldn’t do that. He’d have to answer her questions correctly and get (so-called) Sanae back. Unlike (so-called) Mizuhito and (so-called) Shuuhei from before, she wasn’t a bother to him.

(So-called) Kyouhei faced the goddess nervously.

As ever, (so-called) Kaoruko pulled out a (so-called) Sanae he’d never seen before.

“Was this ‘lively (so-called) Sanae’ the one you dropped?”

The (so-called) Sanae in question had no glasses, and placed her hands on her hips, looking confidently at him.

“I’m (so-called) Sanae Murata,” she proclaimed energetically with a wink, then continued: “Curses are my hobby! And the occult!”

She was so frank it was almost possible to take curses and the occult as sports.

“I’m kinda bad at cooking,” she went on, “but I’m sure I can overcome that with fighting spirit☆”

It looked like she was a rather tomboyish girl now.

(So-called) Kyouhei looked hesitantly into her eyes as he spoke: “Um, (so-called) Murata-san, your glasses...?”

One of the things that could well be called a characteristic feature of hers was missing.

But...

“I’ll make up for them with fighting spirit! Yeah!”

If fighting spirit could cure bad eyesight, there wouldn’t be a single person wearing glasses.

Well, the only people worried about that probably had some odd hobbies, so let's leave that be.

While (so-called) Kyouhei stood aghast, (so-called) Kaoruko pulled up the next (so-called) Sanae from the lake.

"You look unhappy?" Kaoruko pointed out.

"Ah, well, that's not quite the problem."

"If it's not 'lively (so-called) Sanae,' maybe it's 'adorable-and-pure (so-called) Sanae?'"

The next figure was a (so-called) Sanae with a slight smile on her face.

She was wearing the same as the original (so-called) Sanae, but...

"...(So-called) Nanbu-senpai."

Her mannerisms were different. Her hands were together in front of her dress as she gave a bow that was neither deep nor shallow. She seemed like a noble girl that had been shut away.



“I think there are many ways in which I don’t deserve you,” continued the (so-called) Sanae, “but for you, I shall do my utmost. If you are willing, could I call upon you, for reference, perhaps over a cup of tea?”

The lack of embellishment with adorable-and-pure (so-called) Sanae let her inherent goodness show through. She acted like an aristocrat, far more charming than an ordinary village girl could be.

However...

“Now, (so-called) Kyouhei-kun, which (so-called) Sanae-chan did you drop?”

“Hmm...” (so-called) Kyouhei grumbled at the question.

An energetic (so-called) Sanae.

A prim-and-proper (so-called) Sanae.

Both were difficult to discard, but both were obviously not the (so-called) Sanae that (so-called) Kyouhei knew. Though, if he had either forced upon him, it wouldn’t be a hardship like (so-called) Mizuhito or (so-called) Shuuhei were, but he had already decided he would get the real (so-called) Sanae back.

“Goddess,” he addressed her.

“Yuuup?”

“The (so-called) Sanae-san I know isn’t either of these.”

“She’s not? What kind of (so-called) Sanae-chan is she, then?”

“She’s a girl that fits into gloomy places, and looks like she’d melt in the sun.”

“My my,” (so-called) Kaoruko said with some slight confusion, but (so-called) Kyouhei didn’t notice that; his thoughts were centered on getting (so-called) Sanae back.

“She’d look more at home in a graveyard than a flower garden. An old dungeon, a cave—those kinds of dark and gloomy places fit her best!”

“Uh, (so-called) Kyouhei-kun?”

“Shut up for a minute, please, I’m making sure you’ll give me the right (so-called) Murata-san. Right, her smile’s sorta warped, and there’s like a shadow in

her expression! These two's blank smiles aren't any good! It has to be a bit abnormal! Not these innocent grins! They have to be cursing the world; a (so-called) Murata-san without that isn't (so-called) Murata-san at all! She's not a girl who suits being out in the sun!" (so-called) Kyouhei emphasized.

He passionately continued explaining what made (so-called) Sanae herself.

It was probably his own way of trying to save her as soon as possible.

But...

"...Senpai..." a voice came from the surface the goddess was floating upon, "...so that's how you see me..."

(So-called) Kyouhei would never have even dreamed that the real (so-called) Sanae was at her feet, holding her knees.

● ● ●

Once upon a time, there was a young woodcutter.

(And so on.)

● ● ●

"Mysterious things happen around that lake," a girl muttered, gazing upon the lake in question.

Her hair looked like spun sunlight, and her eyes were a crystalline sapphire. Her porcelain skin was unblemished, and her features were beautiful, making her look like the work of a master craftsman... as long as she remained silent.

At any rate, she was gorgeous.

She wore the clothes of a village girl, but it didn't seem at all unfashionable. She was ethereal, like a descending angel. In a few more years, her beauty would make even the gods jealous. She still seemed a little young, but her charm was undeniable.

She was (so-called) Pamil Terrill Karl Bergmann, a self-proclaimed body double android of another country's princess.

You might want to question whether the current era even had the concept of androids, but jumping on that discussion based on a crazy girl's statement is a

futile exercise, so let's not bother. I've said we won't, so we shan't. You might also say the same about that type of insanity, but—(you get the picture).

“Don't get too close. If you fall in, it'll be me that has to deal with it,” warned (so-called) Kyouhei from behind (so-called) Pamil as she approached the shore.

“(So-called) Kyouhei, as royalty, I must investigate that which disturbs the peace,” she declared.

She had come to investigate at the request of the fiefdom's people with (so-called) Kyouhei. Not having an attendant was nothing but carelessness, but well, the (so-called) Bergmanns were the royalty of the commoners, so it's only natural.

...The person who says something outright usually wins.

“I think the masses are far warier of a princess who can shoot beams from her eyes or fire from her hands...” (so-called) Kyouhei muttered.

(So-called) Pamil seemed to take issue with that and whirled around.

He saw her eyes sparkle and reflexively readied himself.

“Royal Beeeeeeaaaammm!”

Pew!

A line of light skimmed past Kyouhei's face.

He could also smell something burning near his ear.

He looked sideways, only moving his eyes.

He had a feeling he could see his hair warping from the heat.

If he'd been a little to the side, that would have hit his face and carved out a hole in his skull. A cold sweat ran down his back.

“Y-You...”

“That was close, (so-called) Kyouhei, there was a huge bug next to your face.” (So-called) Pamil's face was displaying an utter lack of ill will.

“You moron! You’re going to end up killing me before I get stung!”

“What do you mean? My automatic alignment systems are perfect. I’ll never accidentally fire at you, so rest assured.”

“As if I could do that!” he roared with all his energy.

(So-called) Pamil, for her part, folded her arms and grumbled: “Hmm... (so-called) Kyouhei, you never trust my abilities. Well, whatever, if I build up my character, my reputation will change someday too. First, I’ll solve the mystery of the lake and gain the fief’s trust.”

So saying, she turned back again, unflinchingly wading into the water. (So-called) Kyouhei desperately tried to stop her: “Wait, (so-called) Pamil, if you go in the water—”

“Rest assured,” she said confidently, looking over her shoulder, “I’m waterproof.”

“That’s not the problem!” he cried, but she’d already vanished beneath the surface.

He waited for a while. The second hand would have completed a rotation, but still nothing had happened.

“...Well, I suppose I didn’t ‘drop’ anything this time, she walked in on... her... own...?”

Maybe nothing had happened, but as soon as he started thinking that, the calm voice of (so-called) Kaoruko, the goddess of the lake, sounded: “So you’ve dropped something else.”

“I figured...” he groaned, slumping.

“You’re a regular, so I guess I don’t need to explain, right?”

Said regular customer was not at all happy to be seen that way, and he sighed.

“Did you drop a ‘(so-called) Pamil that doesn’t fire beams,’ or a ‘(so-called) Pamil that doesn’t act bizarrely?’” she asked, showing figures as she pulled them from the water.

(So-called) Kyouhei's breath got caught in his throat as he saw them.

So far, the goddess had always brought out versions that were far from the original, so he hadn't been worrying, figuring she'd be different. On this occasion, though, at least at a glance, they were nearly identical to the (so-called) Pamil that had entered the lake.

"...But..."

(So-called) Kaoruko smiled at his confusion.

Then, the right-hand (so-called) Pamil noticed something: "(So-called) Kyouhei, there's a bug by your face, get down."

The warning made him notice the bug flying by his face.

The one that warned me is the (so-called) Pamil that doesn't fire beams... probably.

Otherwise, she'd have probably just done so rather than warning him.

In that case, he looked towards the (so-called) Pamil at (so-called) Kaoruko's left.

The (so-called) Pamil that doesn't act bizarrely noticed his gaze and said: "Even if you were expecting it, I wouldn't use the beam. I shouldn't use the Royal Powers for everything and scare people. Besides, it's a bit much for a bug."

It was a good argument.

That it was.

The normal (so-called) Pamil would shoot beams with a sneeze, let off fire at a moment's notice, and punch a bear back if it attacked. Plus, she was completely lacking any form of common sense, so those extravagant Royal Powers (?) had caused a lot of trouble for (so-called) Kyouhei.

At least, neither of these (so-called) Pamils would do that.

But...

"Which (so-called) Pamil-chan do you want to take back?" (so-called) Kaoruko asked, tilting her head at him.

(So-called) Kyouhei looked between the (so-called) Pamil that doesn't fire beams and the (so-called) Pamil that doesn't act bizarrely.

They were indistinguishable.

Not firing beams.

Not acting bizarrely.

You couldn't ask for more from a (so-called) Pamil. If either of them was forced on him, (so-called) Kyouhei probably wouldn't be bothered. Even if both of them were foisted off on him, it probably wouldn't be any worse than the bizarre, beam-firing (so-called) Pamil.

So...

"...The one I dropped," he began, keeping the quip about him not actually dropping her silent.

This was a type of game, so to get the prize he wanted, he'd have to use his brain. He'd have to keep in mind everything that had happened with her the previous times.

"The one you dropped," (so-called) Kaoruko prompted.

"The (so-called) Pamil I dropped... was neither of these. She was a more Yamato Nadeshiko-like (so-called) Pamil."

...Silence.

(So-called) Kaoruko peered at him, trying to divine his motivations before making a decision and smiling. "That was a big lie," she said.

"Hahh..."

"Take the real (so-called) Pamil and go home," she said, vanishing into the lake with the other two. In exchange, a sodden (so-called) Pamil appeared.

"(So-called) Pamil!"

"Hmmm," she said, apparently ignorant of the earlier conversation, "I looked everywhere with my Royal Searcher Eye, but it's just a normal lake, (so-called) Kyouhei." He stared silently at her. "Hm? What's wrong, (so-called) Kyouhei?"

"...Nothing," he said with a reluctant smile. He looked up at the sky and let

out a long sigh. “Ahhh, so it ended up like this... It was the perfect chance, and I screwed it.”

“Hm, what are you talking about, (so-called) Kyouhei?”

“Nothing, just talking to myself. I don’t feel like working now, so let’s go home, (so-called) Pamil.”

“I don’t mind... but, (so-called) Kyouhei?”

“What?”

“Did something good happen?” she asked curiously.

“...Not really?”

(So-called) Pamil trotted along after him as he turned to go home.

“That’s not fair, (so-called) Kyouhei, you know you can tell me?”

“It’s nothing,” he insisted.

Indeed, nothing. As they had one of their usual conversations, (so-called) Kyouhei pointed himself towards home.

He tried to keep a frown on his face, but it didn’t work.

...

And thus:

“Ah, welcome back, (so-called) Kyouhei.”

(So-called) Kyouhei’s blood froze in his veins as he opened the door.

The room was full.

It was a scene from hell.

The hut had originally been for him to live in alone, in an area with low population density.

Currently, there was the (so-called) Mizuhito that loved standing out sitting on the sofa, and the (so-called) Mizuhito that was a spectacled swot. There was also the pigheaded (so-called) Shuuhei and the motherly (so-called) Shuuhei. (So-called) Sanae was still clutching her knees in a corner, and for some reason, the original (so-called) Shuuhei was next to the goddess, looking like a

newlywed couple.

“...I forgot,” (so-called) Kyouhei groaned.

Then he noticed something.

His gaze fell to his hand to see what he was holding.

It was a huge axe.

That meant...

“Right,” he muttered to himself, with a cornered expression, “wood’s not the only thing this is for, is it?”

● ● ●

Incidentally, if you go back to the original texts of famous fairy tales like *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Arabian Nights*, they’re actually rather cruel. It’s surprisingly rare for people to know that.

Afterword

Thank you as ever! I'm the light novelist, Sakaki.

This was the second volume of *Fake Fake*, which used to be serialized in Hobby Japan's *Novel Japan*, and is now a part of *CharaNov!*.

Now, in the last volume, I talked about the other author who gave me the initial idea for this series. I met that same author, Yuji Nakazato, at a Rookie of the Year award ceremony and took another small idea from him.

"Sakaki-san, Sakaki-san."

"What is it?"

"About your work with HJ."

"Ah, yes, *Fake Fake*."

"What happened to the memory card?"

"Huh?"

"Well, if that robot was based on the a*bo, then it should have a memory card that stores its individuality. So, no matter what happened to the body, if they can get a new one, he'll be fine."

"Oh!"

So I added some to that chapter.

Frankly speaking, it did bother me how easily Pamil got over it in the next chapter (it's less of an issue in a monthly form, but when published as an actual book...), so it was an unexpected bit of help.

Thank you, Nakazato-sensei.

Back to the topic at hand.

I went to Taiwan recently for some market research, as well as a bit of a break.

There's actually a lot of my works, including *Fake Fake*, that have Taiwanese versions. One of the reasons I went was because I wanted to see how they were lined up in the stores. Taiwan is one of the three famous pro-Japan countries (I think the others are Turkey and Palau?), so it was a pleasant trip.

Well, the cities weren't too different from Japan's, and you see a lot of signs in Japanese (it looks like the character *〇* is in vogue at the moment, so you often see it sandwiched between Chinese words, probably like you see a lot of ' & ' between adjectives in Japan).

It was a bit of a surprise to just see *CharaNov!* being sold in the bookstores, though. I didn't specifically go to stores that catered to otaku, and yet even normal bookstores in the towns had Japanese anime and game magazines. In Japanese, of course.

Western books are sold in Japan, but it's usually in the corner of the shop, or only in specialty shops. I was surprised it was so different over there.

There were illustration collections from artists I know, and Taiwanese versions of us authors' books, but it was more for enthusiasts (like, they were at the bottom of the shelves, or in enthusiast stores).

At any rate, I had an enjoyable short three-hour flight. Well, I proofread this light novel and a book from another company to use the time, so it was a fun journey.

Anyhow, it was somewhat strange to see my own name in a bookstore in another country.

At any rate.

I think this series will only be one more volume, but I hope you will accompany me to the end.

Fake Fake production staff:

Ichiro Sakaki

Miki Sakamoto

Think! Hidaka (production management)



"That... That's...
That's awful...!"

Seeing their overlapping figures, Sanae...
(From Chapter 1 - The Hesitation of White Day)

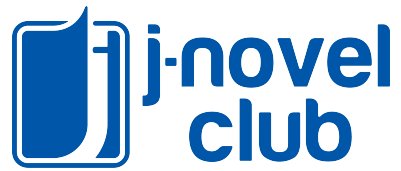
Wild Times with a
Fake Fake
Princess
Lunatic Sister





DO YOU
WANT A BATH?
DINNER? OR
PERHAPS—

Pamil's declaration of the
hopes and dreams of men!
(From Chapter 6 - Cooking Was That Difficult?)



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Wild Times with a Fake Fake Princess: Volume 2

by Ichiro Sakaki

Translated by MPT

Edited by Eric Bravo Górriz

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